A CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION BY JOHN UPDIKE

by

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All sources used have been acknowledged and this thesis is my own composition.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

John Updike has had a prolific and popularly successful writing career. At the age of thirty-nine, he has published five novels (two of which have been sold to film companies), four collections of short stories plus an anthology of stories previously published in the earlier volumes, three collections of poetry, and a volume of assorted prose. He has received considerable critical attention, though only one full-length study of his work has yet been published. Acclaim has come to him in the conferment of the American National Book Award (for The Centaur) and election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. His best-selling Couples brought him the dubious distinction of a cover story by Time. Perhaps because of his rapidly achieved fame, some critics have been reluctant to consider his work as that of a serious artist. It would be premature to judge the place Updike will come to occupy in American fiction or to place him in a "school" of writing such as "New Yorker fiction" or "contemporary pastoral". Although his poetry is mostly clever trivia, his prose fiction is sufficiently diverse and original to compel critical assessment on its own, which is the aim of this essay.

Critical discussion of Updike's prose fiction has focused on questions of his style and significance and falls into one of several categories. Some denounce his style and deny his work any significance whatever. Norman Podhoretz, for example, says Updike's prose is "overly lyrical,

bloated like a child who had eaten too much candy,"[1] and argues that his "verbal pyrotechnics"[2] merely conceal sentimentality and cruelty. Leslie Fiedler dismisses Updike as "that New Yorker writer much touted recently by those who want the illusion of vision and fantasy without surrendering the kind of reassurance provided by slick writing at its most professionally all right."[3] Elaborating the criticism that Updike uses showy language to escape meaningful treatment of his subject, Richard Gilman, in a review of The Centaur, writes "there is a continual process of sidling up to an alarming or vivifying truth and then backing away into mummifying rhetoric or unearned lyricism or stipulated preciosity or sententious statement."[4] In the most sweeping published condemnation of Updike's work, John Aldridge asserts, "He does not have an interesting mind. He does not possess remarkable narrative gifts or a distinguished style. He does not create dynamic or colorful or deeply meaningful characters....he engages the imagination so little that one has real difficulty remembering his work long enough to think clearly about it."[5]

In contrast to such negative criticisms, there has also been lavish praise for Updike's style, often accompanied by

[1] Norman Podhoretz, "A Dissent on Updike," Doings and Undoings (New York, 1966), p. 251.

[2] Podhoretz, p. 252.

[3] Leslie A. Fiedler, Waiting for the End (London, 1965), p. 164.

[4] Richard Gilman, "The Youth of an Author," New Republic, 148, April 13, 1963, p. 26.

[5] John W. Aldridge, "The Private Vice of John Updike," Time to Murder and Create (New York, 1966), pp. 164-165.

scant attention to questions of significance or meaning. In a review of The Centaur, for example, Stanley Edgar Hyman enthuses, "Updike's baroque metaphors and similes sparkle on the page....Everywhere the language is magical, incandescent; the language of poetry."[1] Arthur Mizener hails Updike as "the most talented writer of his age in America" and praises the way his stories are adorned with "very great and radically irrelevant decorative charm."[2] Granville Hicks feels Updike's strength derives from "his astonishing gift of language, especially figurative language,"[3] and in a review of The Music School, Charles T. Samuels argues that the skill of these stories is sufficient proof of the author's seriousness.[4]

Other critics who admire Updike's style do complain about a lack of substance. A frequent criticism is that although Updike succeeds in capturing outward appearances, "the characters' capacity to feel and to make us feel, escapes him."[5] Walter Sullivan asserts "of all the people who write well, none writes better conversation, better description, better working prose than John Updike,"[6] but then argues that in Updike's work there is evasion of all

[1]Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Chiron at Olinger High," New Leader, 46, Feb. 4, 1963, p. 21.

[2]Arthur Mizener, "Behind the Dazzle is a Knowing Eye," New York Times Book Review, March 18, 1962, p. 1.

[3]Granville Hicks, "Mysteries of the Commonplace," Saturday Review, 45, March 17, 1962, p. 21.

[4]Charles T. Samuels, "A Place of Resonance," Nation, Oct. 3, 1966, p. 329.

[5]Richard H. Rupp, "John Updike: Style in Search of a Center," Sewanee Review, 75 (Autumn 1967), p. 695.

[6]Walter Sullivan, "Updike, Spark, and Others," Sewanee Review, 74 (Summer 1966), p. 711.

moral considerations which leads to total negation in Rabbit, Run. In a general criticism of contemporary American short stories, including those of Updike, Maxwell Geismar notes a stress on "that intricate craftsmanship of 'the well-made story' which even further limits the human and literary content"[1] and claims that talented story writers with such narrow range of vision are symptomatic of an uncritical social system. In a thoughtful assessment of Updike's work, Guerin La Course criticizes his reliance on "language rather than thought, sense rather than sensibility, wit rather than wisdom."[2]

A converse critical judgment is that his lavish style mars the clarity of ideas. In a review of The Centaur, Richard Stern points to a "concern for the richness of minutiae"[3] which is insufficiently controlled. Of Updike's "dilations" in The Centaur he says, "Mingled, as they often are, with barely disguised cliché and syntactic gaucherie, they blur the book's line."[4] David D. Galloway suggests that, particularly in The Poorhouse Fair and The Centaur, Updike is so concerned with stylistic technique that he fails to achieve either intensity or scope in his treatment of existential absurd heroes.[5] Norman Mailer considers it Updike's misfortune that he is honoured for his style, which

[1]Maxwell Geismar, "The American Short Story Today," Studies on the Left, 4 (Spring 1964), p. 24.

[2]Guerin La Course, "The Innocence of John Updike," Commonweal, 77, Feb. 8, 1963, p. 513.

[3]Richard G. Stern, "The Myth in Action," Spectator, No. 7057, Sept. 27, 1963, p. 389.

[4]Stern, p. 389.

[5]David D. Galloway, "The Absurd Man as Saint," The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (Austin, 1966), pp. 49-50.

he claims is "atrocious--and smells like stale garlic,"[1] while his other gifts are insufficiently recognized. Mailer predicts of Updike, "He could become the best of our literary novelists if he could forget about style and go deeper into the literature of sex."[2]

Another approach consists of thematic exposition with little discussion of style. A pastoral theme is often pointed out in the Olinger stories of life in rural Pennsylvania, and in urban stories depicting the city's corrupt influence. The most extensive study of Updike's pastoralism is a Ph.D. dissertation by Larry Eugene Taylor.[3] A second theme deals with time. Childhood memories are remarkably vivid for many Updike characters, and they are often accompanied by a sense of the transitoriness of life and dread of death. In his thematic study of Updike, Thaddeus Muradian argues that "It is only when his characters revert to the past (childhood memories) or to the after life (the Hope) that some sort of salvation or redemption is found."[4]

Existential alienation can be regarded as a third important concern of thematic criticism, with Updike's heroes seen as absurd ones. Rabbit is usually considered the most alienated of his heroes, and some critics find his situation

[1]Norman Mailer, "Some Children of the Goddess," Contemporary American Novelists, ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale, 1964), p. 17.

[2]Mailer, p. 17.

[3]Larry Eugene Taylor, Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1969.

[4]Thaddeus Muradian, "The World of Updike," English Journal, 54, (Oct. 1965), p. 577.

almost paradigmatic for the absurd hero.[1] While usually recognizing some existential elements, other critics stress the religious quest in Updike's fiction. His characters frequently crave personal immortality and faith in God, and this provides motivation for many of their actions. In the only published full-length study of Updike's fiction,[2] religious themes are discovered in and Christian interpretations offered of every work discussed, and Martin E. Marty's label, "a theological road map for the countless Updike fans"[3] is accurate.

In their preface to The Elements of John Updike, A. and K. Hamilton say "The temptation to turn aside from exposition to technical criticism has been continually present, but we have tried to resist it." But, curiously, they go on to say, "We have said no more about Updike's literary technique than was necessary for explaining how he presents his ideas."[4] It is the premise of this essay that such a distinction between style and substance is artificial and misleading. Insofar as there is no full-scale critical treatment of Updike's work which avoids such a dichotomy, this essay will attempt to do so. It will critically examine several works and attempt to point out distinctive characteristics of Updike's writing while offering

[1] See Galloway, pp. 39-40 and Sidney Finkelstein, Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature (New York, 1965), pp. 244-245.

[2] Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, The Elements of John Updike (Grand Rapids, 1970).

[3] Martin E. Marty, quoted in inside jacket of Hamiltons, Elements.

[4] A. and K. Hamilton, p. 7.

interpretations and evaluations. The evaluations, while valid only for the particular works, will hopefully suggest a general critical approach to Updike's work.

The works to be discussed were selected after reading all of Updike's published fiction and virtually every relevant critical article. The stories chosen for analysis are each characteristic of a particular group which together comprise more than half of those he has published.[1] Moreover, each is exemplary of Updike's preoccupation with problems faced at particular stages of life, from adolescence to middle-age, and will be discussed in this chronological order. "Pigeon Feathers" is representative of the Olinger stories, which centre on a boy's experiences and development in a small Pennsylvania town,[2] and often reflect Updike's boyhood in Shillington, Pennsylvania. Updike has written only three stories about life at Harvard,[3] possibly because, as he puts it, "I feel in some obscure way ashamed of the Harvard years. They were a betrayal of my high school years, really."[4] Of these stories, "The Christian Roommates" is one of Updike's finest and most unusual, and was thus included. "Giving Blood" is a story about the Maples, a young couple whose history is traced from honeymoon to near

[1] Forty-six of Updike's eighty-four published stories belong to one or other of these groups.

[2] The Olinger stories are: "You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You," "The Alligators," "Pigeon Feathers," "Friends from Philadelphia," "Flight," "A Sense of Shelter," "The Happiest I've Been," "The Persistence of Desire," "The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother's Thimble, and Fanning Island," "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car," "In Football Season."

[3] "The Christian Roommates," "Deus Dixit," "Homage to Paul Klee."

[4] John Updike, quoted in Time, April 26, 1968, p. 49.

divorce in seven stories.[1] There are eighteen other stories about young couples similar to the Maples,[2] although the more recent describe couples who could easily be "another couple" in Tarbox. "The Bulgarian Poetess" is one of seven stories whose central character is Henry Bech, a middle-aged, disillusioned American writer who does a cultural tour of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.[3] It presents a different view of love from that of the young couple stories and has a maturity and poise sometimes lacking in Updike's earlier work.

Only one novel was chosen for reasons of space and because I feel Updike is more successful as a short story writer. Rabbit, Run was selected because I consider it the best Updike novel and because it has generated the greatest critical controversy. With current opinions so diverse it is important to attempt a coherent interpretation which stresses no aspect of the novel at the expense of others. To appreciate fully Updike's achievement in Rabbit, Run, it is helpful to consider briefly the strengths and weaknesses of his other novels.

[1] "Snowing in Greenwich Village," "Giving Blood," "Twin Beds in Rome," "Your Lover Just Called," "Eros Rampant," "The Taste of Metal," "Marching Through Boston."

[2] "Toward Evening," "Sunday Teasing," "His Finest Hour," "Incest," "A Gift from the City," "Walter Briggs," "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" "Wife-Wooing," "The Astronomer," "The Crow in the Woods," "The Rescue," "The Kid's Whistling," "Avec la Bébé-Sitter," "The Stare," "Unstuck," "The Wait," "I will not let Thee go except Thou Bless Me," "The Orphaned Swimming Pool."

[3] "Rich in Russia," "Bech in Rumania," "The Bulgarian Poetess," "Bech Takes Pot Luck," "Bech Panics," "Bech Swings?" "Bech Enters Heaven." These have been collected in Bech: A Book (London, 1970).

The Poorhouse Fair is an unusual first novel in its concern with the elderly. Its most notable distinction is the sensitivity and compassion with which Updike portrays the aged characters, revealing their peculiar anxieties and alienation from a younger world. Their essential dignity emerges from the tangle of petty squabbles and wistful reminiscences which occupy their time. Updike's skill in capturing exact rhythms of speech is particularly evident in the dialogue of the poorhouse inmates. Unfortunately, the novel fails utterly in its social commentary. Its futuristic setting betrays blindness to pressing social problems, as even Updike now seems to realize.[1] Although the welfare state depicted is meant to caricature the decadence of the present, its implausibility vitiates the attempted satire. Many descriptive passages are flawed by inflated style which has no discernible purpose. The novel's parabolic structure tends to force characters, particularly Conner and Hook, into rigid patterns of behaviour which results in a pervasive lifelessness. This lack of vitality diminishes the interest and significance of Hook's final unstated advice, which, like the entire novel, is ineffective and virtually futile.

The Centaur is ambitious in its attempt to add mythic dimensions to the struggles of a small-town high school teacher. Unfortunately, the mythical elements are never successfully integrated with the naturalistic level of the story, so the novel is fragmented and often quite confusing.

[1] See Foreword to Poorhouse Fair, Penguin ed. (Harmondsworth, 1968).

The events of the Chiron myth do not parallel those recorded in the lives of Caldwell and Peter sufficiently to amplify or clarify the realistic sections of the novel. It is difficult to understand in what sense even a spiritual death on Caldwell's part will save his son, and, although the centaur dies, there is no reason, apart from the myth's conclusion, to infer Caldwell's death.[1] The mythic sections are the most elaborate in style and obtrude annoyingly on the realistic account of three days in the lives of George and Peter Caldwell, which by itself is a notable achievement. George Caldwell is one of the few thoroughly convincing good characters in contemporary American fiction. His ironic self-deprecation is expressed in a distinctive, memorable idiom which Updike handles with skill. Peter's attitude towards his father is conveyed with considerable discrimination and integrity, and their relationship is the most moving thing in the novel. It is regrettable that such a finely realized experience in the lives of a father and son should be fatally burdened by a mythic super-structure.

Considerably less ambitious is Updike's fourth novel, Of the Farm. While free from major structural flaws, it is a slight work, whose subject might have been treated with greater discipline in a short story. There is considerable elaboration of the characters' shifting emotional states and care is taken to depict Joey's memories, but finally these prolonged illuminations seem purposeless. There are moments

[1]Although Updike has insisted Caldwell does not literally die, the number of critics who have thought otherwise indicates the confusion of the novel's ending. See "The Art of Fiction XLIII," an interview with Updike by C.T. Samuels, Paris Review, 45 (Winter 1968), p. 92.

of sharp insight, particularly in jealous struggles between Peggy and Mrs. Robinson, but these are inadequate to give the novel a distinctive life of its own.

Updike's most recent novel, Couples, has gained notoriety because of its explicit treatment of sex, but religion is just as important in the novel. It is indeed more concerned with religious themes than any other of his novels, and the conclusion has apocalyptic overtones with the church overlooking Tarbox crashing in flames. As in other Updike works, there are finely drawn characters whose inner lives have an important bearing on the events of the novel. There is a sure grasp of social forces in his depiction of the upper-middle-class, and the couples' prejudices and values are often exposed with shrewd wit. However, although Piet and Foxy's affair generates some pathos, and Angela's situation is treated with compassion, ambiguity in the characterization of Piet makes Updike's attitude towards the couples' affairs seem overly detached and callous. As most of the novel is seen from Piet's perspective and we are given the greatest insight into his thoughts and actions, it is inevitable that he attracts sympathy. We are made familiar with the warm relationship he had experienced with his parents and the shock caused by their death. The novel makes clear that Piet's philandering is partly an attempt to regain the security and comfort of parental love. But his behaviour is disturbing, for when he seems to have found the sort of meaningful relationship he craves, we discover he is lusting for another woman. For example, at the party on the night of Kennedy's assassination, Piet's longing to be with Foxy is so intense he nearly exposes

their affair to the other couples. But while dancing with Georgene he realizes he has been considering her his mistress throughout the affair with Foxy, and he encourages Marcia to sexually stimulate him when they dance together. Such scenes make Piet's judgment that "nothing matters but ass"[1] seem an accurate expression of his values. This is difficult to reconcile with the insistence throughout the novel on Piet's reflective, spiritually sensitive nature, and the hints, largely through cruciform imagery, of Piet's likeness to Christ. It is difficult to know how to respond to Piet because of such apparent contradictions, and, as he is the main centre of consciousness in the novel, there is a resulting confusion as to what attitude we are meant to take to the behaviour of the couples. If sex is all that matters, their actions are justified, but the novel does not support such an interpretation and in fact seems to condemn reliance on sex to give life meaning.

Clearly the novel shows the inadequacy of sex as a substitute for religious faith, but because most of the affairs depicted are so shallow, the final damnation of sex as surrogate for God lacks force and seems unnecessarily harsh. Piet's affair with Foxy encompasses more than physical attraction, but it is difficult to evaluate its significance because of the already noted ambiguity in Piet's character. This affair cannot be regarded as a standard of genuine love, so that finally, although love and sex are dominant themes, the novel fails to present a convincing love relationship. The lack of love in the lives of the couples makes their affairs

[1]John Updike, Couples (London, 1968), p. 239.

seem empty and hardly worthy of such extensive critical exposure. This is particularly true of the tedious Applesmith section, which qualifies nothing in the novel and adds only quantity to the affairs described. It is in the character of Piet that Updike attempts to give depth and significance to his documentation of American upper-middle-class suburban life in the sixties, but the ambivalence of his character makes it difficult to see how Piet's life illuminates the problems of the other characters. The symbolism of his fear of ice, like that of the final holocaust, is heavy-handed and fails to suggest deeper meaning in the novel.

Despite the extensive observation of American upper-middle-class suburban life in Couples, Updike's criticisms of this society are fairly shallow. The social attitudes of the characters are made clear, but there is little questioning of the assumptions underlying these attitudes. The one social reformer of the group, Irene Saltz, is ridiculed for using her political activity as an erotic outlet. The inability of most of the couples to refrain from partying on the night of Kennedy's assassination occasions some criticism of their political views, but only at a superficial level, as when Harold tells his joke about Republican reactions to news about Oswald.[1] Piet seems to recognize the inadequacy of America's material prosperity when he compares the country to a child whining for more candy.[2] However, this criticism is only developed at a personal level in the novel, and there is little

[1] Updike, Couples (London, 1968), pp. 298-299.

[2] Couples, p. 200.

examination of its social implications. Couples is a broad documentation of a segment of American society, but its criticisms are generally limited to personal relationships. The social milieu of the couples is described with accuracy and subtlety, but there is little real criticism of this environment. This is a weakness in a novel which is clearly concerned with the behaviour of a particular social group.

Although the problems posed by Couples have only been touched on, fuller treatment of the novel is beyond the scope of this essay. Discussion of Updike as a novelist will be limited to the analysis of Rabbit, Run.

The critical method adopted for this essay will be to go through the selected works chronologically, interpreting and evaluating in the course of discussion and noting Updike's distinctive characteristics. This method necessitates what may seem the disadvantage that exposition and critical commentary are sometimes mingled, but I think it preferable to synopses followed by general conclusions, because it is less likely to force the works into artificial categories. Also, the interpretations and assessments have emerged from close scrutiny and will only be convincing if the works are examined in detail. What such an approach may lose in neatness of organization will hopefully be gained in consistency and fairness of interpretation and judgment.

The List of Works Consulted offers the most complete compilation of Updike's prose fiction and related critical articles, excluding most book reviews, published to date.

Chapter 2 "Pigeon Feathers"

The opening of "Pigeon Feathers" expresses a sense of displacement and loss, a recurring theme in Updike's Olinger stories. The move from Olinger to a farm in Firetown, instigated by the mother, is disquieting to father and son, who never feel at home there. David's uneasiness is conveyed through nostalgic memories of rooms in the old house. There is a characteristically sharp image from childhood in David's recollection of an hallucination brought on by measles. Updike is skilled in describing with precise detail remembered states of mind; here, the sight of a bed's edge when dizzy and feverish. The point of this memory is that now, on the farm, furniture associated with nightmarish fears is prominently displayed. This suggests that the move means more of a displacement for David than mere shifting of furniture.

The second paragraph confirms this suggestion, for David finds it "obscurely depressing"[1] to arrange the family's books. The cause of the depression is not simply the "odor of faded taste" (p. 117) which clings to his mother's college books, but the awareness of "the insulting gulf of time that existed before he was born" (p. 117). This reaction helps define David's character as a sensitive adolescent, unsure of himself in relation to the past, yet curious enough to resent gaps in his knowledge. He feels threatened by the unfamiliarity of the past as well as by his new home, for he

[1]John Updike, "Pigeon Feathers," Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories (New York, 1962), p. 117. Subsequent references to this story indicated by page numbers in the text are to this edition.

likes things to be orderly and the past may contain disturbing ideas.

The description of the pages of the Wells text as seeming "rectangles of dusty glass through which he looked down into unreal and irrelevant worlds" (p. 118) betrays a characteristic fault of Updike's writing. Not only is this metaphor inconsistent with the preceding sentence, where the print is "determinedly legible" (p. 118), but it does not arise naturally from the context, for there is no reason yet for the worlds to seem "unreal and irrelevant" (p. 118). And if the history does seem irrelevant to David, it is even more difficult to understand the next sentence, which suggests David is close to tears. There is no justification for such a response, and, like many of Updike's descriptions, it seems burdened with a "significance" the source of which is lost in imprecision and innuendo. Updike's use of metaphor to extend the meaning of a passage often fails through inexactitude and obscurity. It is not simply that his descriptions are precious and overwritten, for an elaborate style may be both functional and effective. But what will be noted throughout Updike's work is a tendency to confuse the drift of a passage through metaphoric writing which fails to enlarge the literal meaning because it is inaccurate and sometimes even contradictory within the context.

In the synopsis of Well's account of Jesus, the parenthetical "the small h horrified David" (p. 118) is a much more explicit and revealing comment about David. He has a firm childhood belief in Christianity and is shocked by this encounter with religious skepticism. Updike is frequently

more successful in defining characters or situations by precisely noted detail than by expanded metaphoric description. This is exemplified by the unsuccessful stone simile opening the next paragraph. We know of David's piety, but are not prepared for the excessive reaction to Well's account conveyed by: "It was as if a stone that for weeks and even years had been gathering weight in the web of David's nerves snapped them and plunged through the page and a hundred layers of paper underneath" (p. 119). A weight that has been gathering for years implies a history of religious doubt, but, as his shock is further defined, it becomes clear that this is his first significant confrontation with unbelief. Updike often expresses important emotions metaphorically, but rarely with success. Here, for example, the stone burdens David's nerves, then plunges through the pages. But surely it would be more accurate to describe his emotion in terms of newly discovered weight which increases with his growing doubt, without leaving him.

Because this story focuses on David's consciousness, we learn of these shifting reactions from his viewpoint. As in much of Updike's work, there is continual interplay between what are clearly the central character's thoughts expressed in his own distinctive idiom and the more "literary" metaphoric descriptions of these thoughts by a narrator slightly distant from him. In "Pigeon Feathers", although the narrative sections do not sound exactly like David's thoughts or memories, judging by his dialogue, the disparity does not attract attention. Thus we can accept the narrative as a genuine expression of David's thoughts, if not a direct first-person

account. A minor illustration of successful interaction between the character's state of mind and its depiction occurs in the description of David's reaction to Wells' account, when "hot washrags seemed pressed against his cheeks" (p. 119). Only a boy raised in the country would use "washrag" rather than "washcloth", so this feeling of oppressive heat is expressed in terms consistent with David's character.

In his attempt to answer Wells' arguments about Christianity, David gradually realizes that he lacks proof of Christ's divinity and that his specific "answers" to prayer are ambiguous. Both the arguments of Wells and centuries of unknown history seem dark and ominous, and he concedes Wells' point that "hope bases vast premises on foolish accidents" (p. 120). The naiveté and immaturity betrayed by David's prayer requests make it quite credible that, when suddenly faced with sophisticated arguments against belief, he should quickly pass from outrage to doubt.

David's sense of oppression extends to his relationship with his parents, whose arguments grate on him. The first dialogue in the story, between David's parents, shows Updike's considerable skill in characterizing people through their idiom and inflection. It is rare for an Updike character to speak in a way which seems inconsistent with his background and place in society. Not only do the words of his characters usually ring true, but at times they reveal Updike's skill as a humourist, an aspect of his writing often not noticed because of a more serious prevailing tone. In "Pigeon Feathers" the moments of humour occur in the father's flat pronouncements on life and death which contrast sharply with David's

more youthful intensity. The father's sardonic pessimism is conveyed in his stiff enunciation of pat phrases like "Only human indi-vidu-als have souls" (p. 122), and his exaggerated self-deprecation. The dinner scene, with the steam of food clouding the faintly disgusting features of David's father and Granmom and his mother's tears, is a depressing and thoroughly convincing picture of family strife and misery. It is not a gratuitous scene of family tension, however, for it serves to define David's religious anxiety, which is more dreadful, because unfamiliar and formless.

David's vision of death while in the outhouse is credible after the oppressive dinner and religious doubts he has experienced. The visible tremor of a mosquito's heartbeat enlarged by his flashlight against the wall makes David think of death, and the cramped shack reminds him of a grave. The very idea of extinction, where "unaltering darkness reigns where once there were stars" (pp. 123-124), seems a threat qualitatively different from anything he has known. The plausibility of this scene is marred by the comment on David's reaction to the idea of annihilation--"His protesting nerves swarmed on its surface like lichen on a meteor" (p. 124)--which is confusing and preposterous. Updike often attempts to give large metaphysical dimensions to a character's experience through elaborate, far-reaching metaphors, but the images are frequently so unrelated to the context as to be ludicrous. It is in more concrete, precise observations that Updike succeeds in capturing the significance of a character's experience. For example, the use of terrors from science fiction to convey David's fear is in keeping with his reading

habits and also generates powerful images of cosmic desolation.

When David returns to his parents' argument, he perceives his father's position in front of the dark fireplace as similar to his vision in the outhouse, and the father's insistence that he doesn't want to be carried back to the dark ages ironically confirms this view. David finds momentary solace in the dictionary definition of "soul", but then his mother breaks an angry silence by telling her husband, "You talked Pop into his grave and now you'll kill me. Go ahead, George, more power to you; at least I'll be buried in good ground" (p. 127). The father's often repeated response, "This reminds me of death" (p. 127), has a new menace for David because for the first time he considers its meaning. These unwitting reminders of death arise naturally from the context of the family argument, and reinforce David's fear. His sensitivity to parental quarrels is apparent in the vicarious guilt he experiences when his father angers his mother. But when in bed, he hears his parents grunt peacably in the next room, and realizes "they seemed to take their quarrels less seriously than he did" (p. 128). This insight into how parental discord affects a thoughtful child is one of Updike's many subtle observations about familial relationships.

When David's thoughts return to death, a crack of light through the door to his parent's room is the source of his hope that in death there will be "a crack of light, showing the door from the dark room to another, full of light" (p. 128). The image is natural and suitable, and the full horror of David's imagined death is expressed in "Never touch a doorknob again" (p. 128). His experiment of begging Christ

to touch his fingers in the darkness to give him faith for life catches all the ambivalence of such tests. He is uncertain whether a pressure he feels is air or his pulse, or the touch of Christ. David's belief that Christ's touch would be infinitely gentle shows both his longing for confirmation of faith and willingness to rationalize its absence.

On a Sunday when his father is at church, David follows his mother about the fields, quietly seeking from her the help he needs to restore his faith. In his mother's passionate talk about the land we see the source of David's feeling that she is "foreign" (p. 129) to him, for he derives no such strength from nature. In fact, now that he recognizes "the possibility of all this wide scenery sinking into darkness" (p. 130), he feels protective towards his mother, wanting to keep this from her. The deliberate reminder of David's experiment in "the menace all around them, blowing like a breeze on his fingertips" (p. 130) is contrived and distracting, for it is unlikely either a menace or wind would be sensed chiefly in fingertips. David gains but paltry consolation from his mother, based on her prejudice against working on Sunday.

David's father's renewal of vehemence against farm life on his return from church is again expressed in harsh clichés, exaggerations, and repetitions, which are both amusing and pathetic. His reckless, biting comments reveal why David seeks more solace from his mother than father, for she is the more serious, reflective parent. David shares his father's distaste for rural life, though, and thinks of the members of his catechetical class as farm animals.

The description of Reverend Dobson is flawed by that of his hands which "flickered like protesting doves when he preached" (p. 131). Presumably some Christian symbolism is intended, but the image conveys no determinable meaning and is visually distracting. More enlightening is the insight into David's moral discrimination regarding the minister. Though flattered, he finds Dobson's expressions of disbelief at the farm children's stupidity "delicately disquieting" (p. 132). The depiction of the embarrassed class response to David's questions is skillful, for it is both dramatically convincing and conveys David's growing suspicion that they all share a secret of which he is ignorant. His questions are perceptive and get to the core of Dobson's disbelief. The change in stance as the minister becomes defensive and David angrily pursues his queries amplifies his sense of betrayal. When he looks at his catechetical text through tears of outrage he sees further evidence of glib, cheap faith, for "short words like Duty, Love, Obey, Honor, were stacked in the form of a cross" (p. 133). David's assumption of the shame he feels rightly belongs to the minister for his shocking denial of faith is in keeping with his character and further stresses his sensitivity.

Particularly in The Centaur and the Olinger stories which focus on a young boy, Updike shows considerable understanding of adolescent patterns of behaviour. Here, for example, he shows awareness of the way young people often feel guilty at the discovery of adult deception and hypocrisy. He also points out the indignation attendant on the realization that adults employing a double standard with young people

implicitly deny them their maturity. The respect and insight with which Updike treats youth are consistent virtues of his work.

David's crisis of faith is a potentially existential one, for what he craves is the assurance that everything does not lead to nothingness, since he believes that only a faith in immortality makes good things possible. In the revelation that even his mother doesn't truly believe in immortality, David becomes so angry he rejects all that is most compelling in her. His feeling of hatred recalls Christ's words that his followers must hate their mothers, and validates his decision to follow the Truth. The omission of "the Life" (p. 138) in David's memory of Christ's teaching indicates a possible neglect of evidence in his search for signs.

The relationship between David and his mother is kept from sentimentality by the precise accuracy of dialogue in conveying the variety and complexity of their attitudes to each other and by the fact that David does challenge his mother's authority when he feels his integrity threatened. That his intimacy with her is unique is made clear when he feels betrayed by her revelation of his fears to his father. This betrayal may also indicate his mother's lack of self-confidence in dealing with the situation, despite her calm recommendation of Plato's cave parable. The hyperbolic idiom and self-deprecation with which David's father talks about death show why David cannot take him seriously enough to feel threatened by his words. At most David regards his father as a "distant ally" (p. 139), whereas his mother commands greater respect and therefore is more capable of hurting and

disturbing him.

The lack of distance in perspective between the narrator and David contributes to the effective realization of his character, but at times it results in a disturbing self-dramatization. When David's parents fail him he thinks: "They none of them believed. He was alone. In that deep hole" (p. 139).[1] Certainly David's problem deserves serious treatment as he is a boy who would feel genuine despair. But the lack of irony in this passage blurs the proper perspective of David who is, after all, fourteen years old, not a mature existential hero. David's father's hyperbolic praise of death may ironically qualify David's melancholy thoughts, but David's understanding of his father's weakness makes it difficult to interpret the father's exaggerations as a standard showing up the immaturity of David's attitude. In many of Updike's stories there is so little distance between narrator and chief protagonist that it is extremely difficult to judge the extent to which the protagonist is viewed ironically. This passage illustrates a frequent critical problem in dealing with Updike, for some irony is necessary to keep the passage from sentimentality, but it is not easy to determine precisely the attitude with which David is here regarded. Because David perceives the self-disgust underlying his father's words, they lose much of the force necessary for an ironic effect, even though such an effect may be intended by their juxtaposition with David's thoughts. A more appropriate

[1] In the Penguin ed. of Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories (Harmondsworth, 1965) this paragraph concludes with the repetition of "Alone" (p. 96) which adds to the melodrama of David's thoughts.

perspective of David is gained in the next paragraph (p. 140) detailing the flimsy bits of evidence with which David tries to nourish hope.

The land plays an important role in much of Updike's work, and in "Pigeon Feathers" David thinks of the farm in terms of darkness and emptiness, and, with his father, continually contrives to escape it. Although the story never makes explicit the cause of David's distaste it seems likely that the farm forces him into silence and reflection, when his anxiety is worst. When on the farm David and his father do violence to it with destructive acts, perhaps in an attempt to lessen its menace. Thus the shotgun is a most appropriate birthday gift for David. In the description of the dreaded quiet of the farm which David can no longer fill with reading, the sentence "All gaiety seemed minced out on the skin of a void" (p. 141) is obscure, and provides a further example of Updike's awkward use of metaphor. The most likely interpretation is that gaiety in life has vanished for David because of the void threatening him, but the words "minced" and "skin" make the sentence confusing and opaque, since they relate to nothing in the context.

Further evidence of Updike's tendency towards inaccurate, vague metaphors can be seen in the description of David's summer pastimes. Stranded on the farm, shooting tin cans is a surrogate for the clatter of the pinball machine, and permits David some solace in comforting his frightened dog. He notices the intricacy and sureness with which the dog has been formed, but acquires no specific religious hope from this, although it foreshadows the story's conclusion. The

rather lyrical description of the dog is marred by the comparison of his nostrils with "two healed cuts" (p. 142) which hardly suggests the symmetrical elegance intended. Returning from shooting the sight of books rekindles David's anxiety. This description is flawed by the imprecision of referring to the "queer softness and tangled purity" (p. 142) of Plato's parable. These abstractions in no way illuminate the source of David's puzzlement.

During the discussion about shooting pigeons, each character's distinctive idiom is maintained and reveals varying attitudes. Both the mother and Granmom have quite superficial reasons for wanting the birds shot, and the mother acts as if she disapproves until David agrees to the chore. The father's brusque comment, "Kill or be killed, that's my motto" (p. 143), is perfectly in character. David's acceptance seems to stem mainly from a wish to avoid argument, although the "pleasant crisp taste" (p. 144) he has afterwards suggests a certain relish in the task. It is implausible that the already noted urge to destroy on the farm should cause a new taste sensation.

The mood of the story changes when David enters the barn to kill. At first the tone is hushed and expectant, as if something significant is impending on David. The mysteriousness of the barn is stressed in the description of its night-like appearance in mid-day. The numerous active verbs describing the first pigeon David shoots emphasize its individuality and vitality, making its killing seem dreadful. Because it is seen anthropomorphically, the "slap of the report" (p. 145) comes as a shock, as does the fact that

after it has been shot, its head nods "as if in frantic agreement" (p. 145).

After killing several, David's attitude towards the pigeons becomes callous, for now they are "impudent things" which dirty the "starred silence" of the barn with "filthy timorous life" (p. 146-147). Though he feels like a "beautiful avenger" (p. 146) and a creator, he avenges nothing and is unequivocally destructive. His sensation of mastery may be a way of ignoring the import of what he is doing, for the transformation of the vibrant birds into a mere "parcel of fluff" (p. 146) is precisely the sort of wasteful horror which has terrorized him. The pleasure he takes in accurate shooting is short-lived and when there are no more pigeons to kill, he is reluctant to pick up the bodies, for this brings him closer to death. He had only been able to kill by thinking of the pigeons as worthless, which is psychologically valid, as is the pride he derives from handling a lethal weapon expertly.

The silence in the barn now, like silence throughout the story, suggests death. Before shooting the pigeons, David had observed them in detail, and now as he carries their bodies to be buried he notices them even more carefully, and is disconcerted at the unfolding of a bird's wings, "as if the creature had been held together by threads that now were slit" (p. 148). His awareness of what he has done is reinforced by his mother's telling him to bury them because "They're your kill" (p. 149). The mother's appearance of "listening to the ground" (p. 149) as she leaves David may imply her sense of guilt at disrupting part of the farm's life,

and may even be intended to recall Abel's blood "crying" from the ground. In any case the reference is obscure and is an instance of Updike's tendency to load a scene with import not arising naturally from the events. It is David's reaction to death, not his mother's, which is crucial.

The conclusion, with its poetic and beautiful description of the pigeonfeathers, conveys David's realization of a vital "controlled rapture" (p. 149) of creation which transcends the birds, encompassing all of life. As A. and K. Hamilton have rightly pointed out,[1] David is not simply discovering the teleological argument for the existence of God. The stress in this final paragraph is on the effortless joy of creation, which becomes a felt presence, almost an epiphany for David. It is this experience of lavish creativity which convinces David that such a Creator will surely let him live forever. David perceives the beauty of the birds, but there is a harsh reminder of their value in the phrases "bred in the millions" and "exterminated as pests" (p. 149). He knows his own worth in relation to them, so as witnesses of God's care they point to the infinitely greater care He has for him. The final words of the story appropriately recall Christ's teaching about sparrows. The renewal of David's faith is made credible by the brilliant description of the dead pigeons.

The ending of "Pigeon Feathers" is less than satisfactory, however, because of some characteristic excesses in the last sentence of the story. The image of the "crusty coverings"

[1] A. and K. Hamilton, The Elements of John Updike, pp. 86-87.

(p. 149) lifted from David and the "feminine, slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands" (p. 150) is a distractingly wordy attempt to depict David's state of mind through sensation, and fails even to present a believable physical experience. The trite exaggeration in the phrase "robed in this certainty" (p. 150) makes the conclusion seem pat, although it is not a large enough flaw to vitiate completely the significance discovered in the vision of the dead birds. Perhaps this final extravagance is meant to suggest an adolescent immoderation in David's response, but the rhapsodic tone of the concluding paragraph does not support such an interpretation. This is another instance in which greater ironic distance between narrator and protagonist would help keep the story from banality. The final sentences of Updike's stories are often rather didactic, laboured statements which tend to claim more for the story than is justified. The concluding sentence of "Pigeon Feathers" is a clear example of such a lapse in tact, and makes it impossible to regard the story as an unqualified success.

Chapter 3 "The Christian Roommates"

"The Christian Roommates", like "Pigeon Feathers", is concerned with a crisis of faith, but the protagonist, a freshman at Harvard, is quite different from David, sharing only his small-town background. The opening paragraph, giving the particulars of Orson Ziegler's life and goals, skillfully conveys his conventional values and intellectual complacency. He has so far encountered only one person he acknowledges to be better than himself "at anything that mattered,"[1] a Chippewa Indian skilled in basketball. Orson has his successful future neatly planned and even a wife-to-be waiting for his return from eastern education. The terms with which the girl is described, "selected and claimed and primed to wait" (p. 128), suggest Orson regards her as an acquisition rather than person he loves. His position in town as the doctor's son and his acclaim at school have given him considerable self-confidence, although he realizes he has much to learn. The qualification that he is willing to learn "within limits" (p. 128) and the further comment about Harvard processing thousands of such boys "with little apparent damage" (p. 128) show more ironic distance between narrator and protagonist than was apparent in "Pigeon Feathers". The description of his assigned roommate as a "self-converted Episcopalian" (p. 128) hints of someone less ordinary than Orson Ziegler.

In his first meeting with Hub, Orson immediately notices

[1]John Updike, "The Christian Roommates," The Music School (New York, 1966), p. 127. Subsequent references to this story indicated by page numbers in the text are to this edition.

his strange habits and this unorthodoxy is perceived as slightly malicious. Orson realizes their relationship will be "a kind of marriage" (p. 129), but is at a loss for appropriate words and utters a banal cliché. Hub, on the other hand, delivers a fluent and enigmatic introductory speech, which irritates Orson, who is used to feeling in command of situations. Orson's recollection of his unsuccessful nicknames, while amusing, also generates some sympathy for his desire to be popularly liked as well as respected. His helpless awareness of his straight role in relation to Hub provides an accurate insight into a common response to unfamiliar, threatening situations, as well as into Orson's character. Orson perceives considerable self-dramatization in Hub's startling revelations, but cannot avoid appearing shocked.

The description of this first confrontation between the roommates shows careful control of dialogue and detailed observation of gesture to characterize the boys and elucidate their respective attitudes. For example, Hub includes the claim to be "an excellent shot" (p. 131) in his statement of pacifism, which betrays his vanity, for he wants it clear his pacifism is not based on lack of virility. Orson's conventionality and growing insecurity are perfectly defined in his answer to Hub's casual, "you've read Hamlet?" (p. 131). He cannot feign knowledge, and feels compelled to tell all he has read, "Just Macbeth and The Merchant of Venice" (p. 131), the two plays every American schoolboy has read. Hub's gesture of offering his shirt shows his subtle achievement of dominance. He puts Orson in a position where he cannot

question what has been designated his without appearing selfish and petty. Hub's articulate, florid individualism is most evident in his statements of belief, such as "I consider myself an Anglican Christian Platonist strongly influenced by Gandhi" (p. 133). The calm assurance with which Hub answers every query about his life style provides considerable humour in this story, for despite its impeccable logic, his consistency is slightly bizarre, because it is based on such unconventional values. Hub's assertions, like those of David's father in "Pigeon Feathers", show Updike's witty use of dialogue to characterize eccentrics. Part of Hub's strength seems to depend on causing shock, for he cannot refrain from telling Orson his view of science. As Orson becomes frightened at the very idea of being at Harvard he prefaces some remarks with swearing, perhaps to appear more manly and sophisticated. He is embarrassed by Hub's recitation of his own application statement because it provides a clear picture of "the boy who had written it" (p. 134), and Orson already feels much older than that boy. It is particularly awkward to hear his words in the mouth of Hub, whose own statements are so much more complex and colourful. That Hub is naive himself is shown in his calm assumption that two professors are already his friends.

The most disturbing of Orson's discoveries about Hub is that "this jaunty apparition had feelings" (p. 135) and is vulnerable to hurt. This revelation prevents Orson from just dismissing his roommate, but he is uncertain how to relate to him. The sentence describing Orson's ambivalent attitude, "able neither to stand erect in wholehearted

contempt nor to lie down in honest admiration" (pp. 135-136) successfully uses a physical metaphor to convey a mental state. The superficiality of Orson's values is again illustrated in his judgment that Hub's mediocre grades indicate lack of intelligence. This opinion also shows lack of discernment, for Hub's statements indicate considerable sharpness and originality of thought. Orson's parochialism is revealed in his stereotype of non-biblical Jews as "a sad race, full of music, shrewdness, and woe" (p. 137).

The paragraph describing the ringing bell (p. 136) is another example of Updike's tendency to burden metaphoric passages with an imposed "significance". The clichés like "bell rang ponderously" and "a heartbeat within the bosom of time" are sufficient to mar this section, but more distracting is the confusing idea that the bell brings "muffling foliation" into the room. It is difficult to see the connection between "angels of whom several could dance on the head of a pin" and the dust motes and traffic sounds which contribute to Orson's stifling anxiety.

In contrast to the density of these images, the description of the other freshmen in the form is fresh and delightful. John Barth is reported to have likened Updike to Andrew Wyeth,[1] and passages of such old-fashioned representationalism justify the comparison. Charges that Updike's descriptive bent is a weakness have already been noted. Although his metaphors are often wordy and pretentious, he is able to create memorable, distinctive characters. "The Christian Roommates", despite limits imposed by the short

[1] Time, April 26, 1968, p. 50.

story form, contains a remarkable number of carefully realized, unforgettable characters, of whom Hub is the most notable. It is a mark of Updike's skill that although Orson is the most flatly conventional of all the roommates, it is his reactions which compel interest. A sympathetic bond with Orson develops because we see the other roommates through his eyes and sense his feelings of personal limitation.

The other pairs of roommates, who are all seen as partners in a relationship akin to marriage--Petersen and Fitch, for example, keep "a strange household" (p. 139)--have at least something in common, if only physical shape. Orson feels shut out from this community of roommates, for he can see no bond between himself and Hub, although the story's title makes explicit what their link is supposed to be. Orson's lack of tolerance for Hub further cuts him off from the other roommates, who manage to get along despite differences. Particularly in the relationship of Petersen and Fitch, there is an example of mutual help and concern which Orson envies but is unable to emulate. Thus the description of the other roommates not only forms a rich background to the story but also provides insight into Orson's inadequate response to Hub and resulting sense of isolation.

Although there is a suggestion of showiness in Hub's "ostentatiously considerate" (p. 140) behaviour, Orson has no cause for complaint, for Hub's way of life is remarkably industrious and disciplined. His scrupulous practice of beliefs, particularly with regard to being vegetarian, both commands respect and causes resentment, for such consistency is frightening in its implied criticism of a less rigorous life

style. Orson's confused response to Hub shows a tension between his own standards of success, which judge Hub to be inferior because of his grades, and an awareness of something admirable in Hub which is outside his scale of values. His confusion is intensified by a feeling that Hub takes his criticisms more seriously than those of others perhaps because he is ostensibly a fellow Christian. That Orson perceives this as a rebuke suggests some questioning of his own beliefs. Instead of thoughtfully examining his priorities, however, Orson lets his resentment increase to the point of confessing hatred for Hub. The difference in Orson's attitude towards his girl at Christmas shows an increase in selfishness, for now he blames her for inept love-making, whereas the first time he had felt at fault.

Orson's surprising confession of hatred is followed and balanced by a delicate evocation of the freshman year cycle from Christmas to second semester. Orson's confession arises easily in the atmosphere of leisurely mutual discovery, but its bitterness is harshly out of tune with the spirit of discovery and renewal, and with the tolerance shown by the other roommate couples. Orson's betrayal of Hub is so deep that to atone he admits to his cynical friends that he also prays. He interprets Hub's behaviour so as to make it seem hypocritical and pretentious, and delivers what he considers the most telling criticism, that Hub is unintelligent. Kern's insight that Orson has missed the point "of what Hub's all about" (p. 149) achieves validity in the light of Orson's vindictive comments on Hub, which reiterate his inability to judge by any but the most conventional standards.

Hub's relationship with the pale red-head is particularly galling to Orson because he had been attracted to the girl, and Hub's conquest is the kind of success he appreciates. His resentment of Hub becomes an obsession, and he is prey to irrational fears and mental sluggishness. There is a suggestion of repressed homosexual attraction in Orson's continual dwelling on Hub's physical appearance, but this is not developed or integrated into the story. The complexity of Orson's reaction to Hub is explored in their discussion about not rooming together. Orson responds defensively to Hub's labelling him materialistic, and blames Hub for causing friction. But when Hub begins his routine of offering his shirt, Orson feels "helpless affection for his unreal, unreachable friend" (p. 156). Part of Orson's resentment results from his feeling that Hub is cold, for he regrets the emptiness of their relationship despite his hatred. It is uncertain whether Hub is hurt by Orson's agreement that they should not room together or by Orson's confession: "I don't know what it is you're doing to me" (p. 156). In any case, there is the suggestion that Hub is not as cold as Orson has assumed. Characteristically, the subtleties of their relationship are more successfully conveyed in such confrontations than in descriptions of Orson's reflections about Hub. This passage is marred only by the paste metaphor (p. 157), which attracts attention without contributing insight into the roommates' silence.

Hub's theft of the parking meter is the spark which causes Orson's resentment to explode in violence. The exaggeration in his vision of going to jail is a symptom of the

tension he feels, and this is exacerbated by Hub's annoying calm and assumption of moral superiority. Hub's responses to the roommates' questions are unpredictible yet quite in keeping with his character. He has carefully considered reasons for his behaviour, which are thoroughly consistent with his beliefs. In his attack on Hub, Orson again thinks of their relationship as a marriage, and, as in a marital struggle, is comforted by knowing the seriousness of the fight has definite limits. This permits him to express all his antagonism which brings a pleasurable release. He is "rigid with anger...yet...happily relaxed" (p. 160) in his attack, which suggests it is the relief of actually combatting the source of his anxiety rather than a sexual thrill from contact with Hub which causes Orson's joy.

The conclusion of "The Christian Roommates" is from a more distant perspective, with career synopses of the freshman roommates. Hub's life continues in its predictible unorthodoxy and Orson's life has gone as he intended it. Orson's final grades are listed a second time because he rates his own achievement in such terms. That Orson is "irritable" and "not as much loved as his father" (p. 162) hints that the attainment of his desires has not proven altogether satisfying. The final sentences of the story quietly point to a crucial difference in Orson's life, of which he is unaware. His abandonment of prayer is described as an amputation, making explicit Updike's attitude towards the loss. Orson's ignorance of the amputation and lack of pain from the scar are regrettable in a person so sure of his motives and goals, and give a tone of sorrow to the story's end, which is less

detached than its crisp, summarizing style at first suggests. Actually, the ending achieves a fine balance between earnest lament and judicious acceptance of the consequences of different values. With its careful control of tone and subtle understatement, it provides a marked contrast to the slack ending of "Pigeon Feathers". It is a considerably more mature conclusion and contributes to the success of "The Christian Roommates".

Although Orson's loss of faith is less explicitly treated than David's in "Pigeon Feathers", this is clearly the controlling idea of the story. Hub's way of life is a sharp challenge to Orson's vague piety, and his radical convictions finally illuminate Orson's lack of faith. Orson fails to comprehend Hub's life because it is neither intelligent nor successful within his conventional value framework. Part of the story's complexity and honesty derives from Hub's depiction as a rather repugnant "saint", with his elaborately externalized practice of faith. And Orson's charge of coldness often seems justified by the pleasure Hub takes in generating shock and antagonism. But in rejecting Hub's personality, Orson also rejects a religious view of life to his own detriment. The account of Orson's relationship with Hub and its effect on him is always credible and often remarkably perceptive. The story is freer than most of Updike's from distractingly inept metaphors. Its structure around the freshman year, with opening and closing synoptic passages, is forceful because the changes Orson experiences both reflect and contrast with the normal freshman cycle. The conclusion arises naturally from events in the story, but is

hardly predictible or foregone. Updike is not unusual in his concern with contemporary American attitudes to religion, but he does offer fresh insights into the problem of belief for modern people. In "The Christian Roommates" he shows the complex and contradictory effects of a modern "saint" on a person of weak faith, and that he does this with wit and integrity is worthy of praise.

Chapter 4 "Giving Blood"

"Giving Blood" is typical of a number of Updike stories in its sensitive presentation of a young couple attempting to cope with married life. The opening sentence shows the Maples' marriage as strained, for the nine years together have been "almost too long."[1] Richard's first words express frustration and exhaustion, and his "goddamits" (p. 18) are in such close juxtaposition with the first sentence they can be taken as condemnation of the marriage itself as well as of the immediate situation. Joan's quiet remonstrances make her seem more mature than her grumbling husband, but the fact that Richard is cut by her rebuke shows he is aware of his responsibility and not totally selfish.

Although "Giving Blood" opens with a fairly detached view of the Maples, the conversations and situations are perceived mainly from Richard's perspective. As in "The Christian Roommates", there is some distance between narrator and protagonist, and Richard's irresponsible attitude towards his wife can be detected in their first argument. Joan's unrefuted accusations about Richard's flirtation indicate he had deserted his wife at the party. In contrast, Joan's response to the charge of "snoogling" (p. 19) with another man is convincing, and Richard does not pursue the point. Her insight into why Richard resents the Matthiessons and the agreement tacit in his changing the subject provide a general comment on their marriage. In the light of Joan's interpretation, Richard's criticisms of the young couple seem

[1] John Updike, "Giving Blood," The Music School (New York, 1966), p. 18. Subsequent references to this story indicated by page numbers in the text are to this edition.

petulant. It is significant that neither questions the assumption that their marriage has become undesirable. Although Joan has appeared somewhat smug and possibly unattractive in these opening paragraphs, she has perceptively understood her husband, and Richard's tirade seems harshly unfair. His flippant references to the founding of the country and the "Age of Anxiety" (p. 20) cast doubt on the soundness of his judgment. Even though we see the Maples' marriage from Richard's point of view, Updike prevents a completely sympathetic response to him by showing the painful effect of his immaturity on Joan. Updike does not reduce their marriage to a simple formula of wayward husband and long-suffering wife, however, and much of the story's interest derives from the complexity of the Maples' interaction. For example, despite the cruelty of Richard's attack on Joan, he feels "fathoms deep into the wrong" (p. 21) when she takes his remarks seriously.

The varying quality of Updike's imagery has already been noted. In "Giving Blood", the porcelain simile (p. 20) used to describe Joan's face effectively suggests the fragility of her defensive masking of emotion. However, the image is made confusing by the contradiction between the opacity of porcelain and the suggestion of transparency in "crystalline" (p. 20). Richard's desire to restore the balance with Joan is expressed in an image (p. 21) which skillfully combines his sense of the growing space between them and the distance they are travelling.

In his stories of married couples, Updike shows considerable understanding of marital dynamics. For example,

Richard's hope that more words will amend his wrongs exhibits a common pattern in marital strife, as does his turning the conversation from their unresolved problems to the baby. There is a telling comment on the Maples' values in their having left a sick baby to attend a party, and Joan at least feels guilty. Her breaking the tense silence enables Richard to confess his fear of giving blood. His calling Joan "Sweetie" (p. 21) out of his weakness and guilt seems a plea for mercy.

Richard's unacknowledged attempt to touch Joan as they walk into the hospital arises from a joke about the King of Arabia who has come to the hospital with an exotic entourage to be treated for glaucoma. A. and K. Hamilton offer an ingenious explanation for his presence in the Boston hospital,[1] and a critique of their interpretation and general methodology may be in order at this point. Briefly, they argue that Richard is a sick king with eye trouble who cannot see that he has abdicated his responsibilities in the sovereign state of marriage, and has declined to slave status. The King of Arabia is to remind the reader of the wisdom of Galen, the founder of Arab medicine, whose theory of humours is applicable to human nature. If the Maples could recall the theory of humours they would understand the sources of tensions in their marriage, for Richard is sanguine and splenetic, Joan phlegmatic and melancholy. This is supported by a footnote which recalls Joan's excess of phlegm "indicated by her long-continuing cold, mentioned in 'Snowing in

[1] A. and K. Hamilton, pp. 64-67.

Greenwich Village.'"[1]

There is insufficient evidence within "Giving Blood" to support such an elaborate interpretation, and it tends to make of the story a complicated cross-word puzzle. The King of Arabia ~~story~~ is mentioned in the story before Richard's recollection of his youthful days when he was "king of his own corner" (p. 25) in a teletype room, so it is likely the discussion of the Arabian king has affected the terms of his reminiscence. Although it is clear that Richard is not a fully responsible or satisfied husband, there is no indication that he has abdicated a dominant role with Joan. If the glaucomatous king is supposed to point up Richard's "eye trouble" it is odd there is no hint of his lack of vision even in metaphor. The reductive attempt to explain the Maples' troubles by simplified medieval psychology does injustice to the complexity of their relationship as developed in the story. If the Arabian king is to remind us of the theory of humours, surely there would be at least an implicit link between the final reference to the king and the discussion of humours. Instead, Richard thinks of the king lying "in a drugged dream of dunes" (p. 31), which hardly recalls Galen's theory.

If one assumes that ideally every element in a short story should be directly relevant to every other, one must either attempt to find connections even where not obvious, as A. and K. Hamilton consistently do in their treatment of Updike's work, or one must find fault with all that seems

[1]A. and K. Hamilton, p. 66, n. 2.

unrelated to the dominant ideas or characters. The problem inherent in such an assumption is the difficulty of determining the degree of relevance necessary to perceive a deliberate link between parts of a story. If the connection between elements is tenuous, I see no reason for assuming the story is flawed. It is difficult to accept A. and K. Hamilton's argument about the role of the Arabian king in "Giving Blood", for it is unnecessary as well as strained. His presence in the hospital can be simply interpreted as part of the story's descriptive background, similar to the intern's gossip with the old man. That it provides no comment on the Maples is not a fault unless one makes a priori judgments about the nature of short stories.

"Giving Blood" is divided into four sections, the first and last depicting the Maples' drive to and from the Boston hospital, the central two focusing on their experience of giving blood. What the blood giving means to Richard can only be understood in the light of what has been shown of his marriage in the first section. From the time they enter the hospital, the events are seen exclusively from Richard's perspective and his reactions provide further insight into their marriage. His fantasy that they are Hansel and Gretel effectively imparts his sense of lostness, as does the idea that his personal statistics on the hospital form are like a hopeless case he must plead. The description of Richard's fear is marred by the implausibility of his considering the legs he glimpses in the blood donation centre "dismembered" (p. 22), and this is worsened by the breathless "horrors!" (p. 22) which introduces the sight. The nature of Richard's

first impression is more successfully defined in the fact that his eyes are "pricked" (p. 22) by the glint of needles and bottles. The experience of filling in the form is a natural reminder to Richard of what he has in common with Joan, if only a date or address. Although he has caused her pain, in seeing that their lives do share a few things he feels some comfort and hope.

The role of joker Richard adopts with the intern is a credible defensive response, for he is jealous of Joan's calm knowledgeability about giving blood. The difficulty of extracting his blood for a sample is annoying both because of the pain and the imputation of niggardliness in the intern's remark. The nostalgia with which Richard recalls the strength and confidence of his youth indicates his present dissatisfaction, which is underscored when Joan interrupts these memories to betray that he is a novice giver of blood.

The strangeness of their positions on the hospital beds causes Richard to see his wife in a new way. He notices the childlike position of her feet and parting of her hair and this makes her seem pathetically vulnerable as she bleeds so readily. The experience of bleeding together causes Richard to think their blood is mingling and further suggests a merging of their spirits. The section describing Richard's sense of mystical union in their common loss is convincing because of his tender perceptions of Joan. To daydream while enduring a slightly painful experience is a natural mode of escape, and because Richard's unusual angle of vision is filled with his wife, it is most likely that he should think of her differently. The comparison of Joan's interruption of

the room's silence to a pebble loosened by a cliff climber is clear enough, but obtrudes with an image remote from hospital rooms.

The discovery that he has bled faster than Joan because of his stronger heart renews Richard's confidence and he makes fresh attempts at jocularity, which are rebuffed. His comment about ticks, meant to demonstrate his self-possession, merely sounds crude, and, like his other jokes, is rather foolish. These fumbling efforts to seem calm and at peace with his wife compel some sympathy for Richard, although we see the bad faith of his atoning offer to visit Joan's relation.

The explicit statement of Richard's desire for telos is abrupt and imposes on the image of the hospital's work. Many of Updike's male characters do long for cosmic order,[1] but the context in "Giving Blood" is inadequate to make Richard's hunger credible. The Maples' marriage has been presented with sufficient insight that the attempt to give metaphysical overtones to Richard's problems is unnecessary and intrusive. Updike rarely succeeds in adding substance to his characters by such overt means.

Although the oddity of being out together in the morning contributes to the Maples' new regard for each other, the source of Richard's exuberant love seems to be their shared experience and concern for each other. Richard appreciates Joan's concern and instead of walking apart as before they lean on each other. The decision to eat at a pancake house is appropriately celebrative, but even in the delight of

[1]This desire is explored at greatest length in the character of Piet in Couples.

sharing a strange meal, the tensions between them reappear. Although Richard's selfishness contributes significantly to their unhappiness, the reference to his not understanding "this business of giving something away and still somehow having it" (p. 33) is another overly theological imposition on the story. This does, however, lead naturally to a discussion of the spleen and the humours, but there is no hint that their marital problems can be ascribed to humour imbalance. Richard's attempt to placate Joan by reminding her of the New England jibe in a peaceful moment is met with a calm which suggests pardon. Joan's response to his apology and promise in the restaurant is ambiguous and Richard interprets it as smugly indifferent, while recognizing the perversity of his irritation. By initiating the subject of Marlene, Joan had shown her concern, so her reply is more likely a granting of forgiveness. That Richard sees permission in her words further illustrates his selfishness.

The frustration of Richard's final effort at reconciliation is convincingly expressed in the story's conclusion. His rage at the single dollar in his wallet is consistent with his nature, and, as in the story's beginning, he is swearing "Goddammit" (p. 34). Although it is uncertain whether Joan's calm is a retreat or advance, her last words receive considerable emphasis, and may be interpreted as a general comment on their marriage. They will both pay for Richard's flirtations and their mutual recriminations. Joan's final words resonate backwards through the story, and we see how what has been shown of their marriage illustrates the cost of their lack of generosity towards each other. At the same time,

their love has been revived by the shared experience of giving blood, and, if they can both "pay" in the sense of giving freely, there is hope for the survival of their marriage. The porcelain image works at the end because it expresses both the composure and vulnerability of this hope.

Like most of Updike's stories about young couples, "Giving Blood" has no paraphrasable "point" and its resolution is tenuous. Its strength derives from perspicacious and sensitive examination of a marriage under stress. The story illuminates many sources of the tensions, but they are only momentarily eased. Although the conclusion is satisfying, no simple solutions are offered. Updike portrays with compassion and understanding the delicate interaction of husband and wife as they touch one another and then retreat. This distinguishes "Giving Blood" and his other Maple stories from a mere "slice of life" tale of marriage.

Chapter 5 "The Bulgarian Poetess"

Updike's Bech stories chronicle the decline of a middle-aged writer, whose triumphant first novel has been followed by less successful works. His productivity has fallen off and popular acclaim ironically reminds him of the gap between his goals and their achievement. Of the three stories following Bech on a cultural tour of Russia and eastern Europe, "The Bulgarian Poetess" most poignantly captures his pained self-awareness. Its treatment of love offers different insights from Updike's stories of young married couples.

By opening with Bech's first conversation with the Bulgarian poetess, followed by a succinct account of his deteriorating career, the story stresses the contrast between the two writers and the reason why Bech is attracted. He is charmed by the unselfconscious honesty with which she discusses her work, for he himself is sinking into crippling subjectivism. In addition to communicating Bech's sardonic view of himself, the summary of his career wittily derides the adulation and exploitation of successful writers in America. This summary also permits Updike to show his awareness of criticisms of his own writing, such as "eclectic sexuality and bravura narcissism."[1] Bech's insecurity in the alien atmosphere of Sofia is expressed by his attempts to disguise his nationality and his isolation in the hotel leads to fears of death. This fear arises naturally from reading Hawthorne and is a believable response to this situation.

[1]John Updike, "The Bulgarian Poetess," Bech: A Book (London, 1970), p. 50. Subsequent references to this story indicated by page numbers in the text are to this edition.

Updike's more disciplined use of imagery in "The Bulgarina Poetess" can be seen in the way many of the story's metaphors further our understanding of Bech's situation. Throughout the story his feeling of strangeness in the communist country is defined in images of mirrored reversals. This is made explicit when Bech considers the new meanings of words like "progressive" and "liberal"; he feels he has passed through "a dingy flecked mirror that reflected feebly the capitalist world; in its dim depths everything was similar but left-handed" (p. 52). This metaphor is used skillfully to reflect Bech's alienation and takes on greater significance in his relationship with Vera. Because the story is presented exclusively from Bech's view, the imagery which colours his perceptions reveals something of his character. For example, it is not surprising that "-ova" catches his attention in the list of writers, for the comparison of Moscow's brightness to a girl's body has shown his interest in women.

The claustrophobia of the meeting with the Writer's Union is stressed just before Vera enters so that her freshness and vitality are all the more striking. Bech thinks of her arrival in personal, romantic terms, and is touched not only by her blonde radiance but also by her having come just for him. The repetition of the opening paragraphs of the story, this time without Bech's observations, shows the importance of what her words reveal about herself, for he has pondered them.

In "The Bulgarian Poetess" Updike skillfully uses the distance between narrator and protagonist for ironic comment on Bech. That Bech's faith in an ideal love which can be

discovered instinctively is not to be taken as a valid belief can be seen in the juxtaposition of his discovery of Vera with a catalogue of the women he has "loved" on this tour, which includes a statue and an entire dancing class. The description of Bech's condition as "romantic vertigo" (p. 60) places his belief in proper perspective. This is not to say that "The Bulgarian Poetess" ridicules the very notion of an ideal love. It is Bech's belief in the sudden manifestation of a perfect love which is shown to be naive by the recollection of the many times he has already "fallen in love" (p. 60), a phrase which connotes blind romanticism.

Further examples of Updike's more economic use of metaphor can be seen in the section describing Bech's growing interest in Vera. The mirror image recurs in the catalogue of women Bech has found attractive, and amplifies the difference between Vera and these other women. The ballerinas have to concentrate on their reflections in the mirror because they need to improve their dancing. Their incompleteness, like the situations of the other women who have attracted Bech, appeals to his desire to rescue people. In contrast, Vera is not seen as a reflection of some need, but as fulfilled and self-contained, and this is what fascinates Bech.

In a somewhat clumsy metaphor, Vera's solitary beauty is associated with a white horse Bech sees in the valley beyond a church he visits. The likening of the horse to a pinned brooch is strained, but it does reflect Bech's preoccupation with a woman. The sharp particularity with which the scene outside the church is described stresses qualities

of naturalness and vitality, in such details as the unself-conscious thrust of the peasant woman's hair and the breaking of the turf by frost. Bech's association of Vera with this scene lyrically defines her charm for him, and thus the description, while delightful on its own, is skillfully used to further our understanding of Bech's attraction to Vera.

Bech's meeting with Vera and Petrov is recalled while he is alone at a ballet, so that what he remembers is what impressed him most. A mirror is crucial to the ballet, and a leap through it leads to a world of magic. The description of Bech's heart leaping with the ballerina "backward into the enchanted hour he had spent with the poetess" (p. 65) is so symmetrical a use of the image its contrivance obtrudes. It is ironic that in condemning literature having little to do with life itself, Petrov misses the significance of Bech's conversation with Vera. Through their discussion of writers, Bech and Vera are able to expose themselves to each other and the talk of love becomes personal confession. This is the most carefully controlled section of the story, for the conversation is always credible and consistent with their situation, but there is a powerful undercurrent of attraction between Vera and Bech. Bech's talk of his work blends open-ness and self-dramatization, and he has the insight to see this. His guilt over posing and suspicion of laziness make him a sympathetic character, so that the futility of his love for Vera is all the more keenly felt. Vera's turing the conversation to love is evidence that his feeling is recipro-cated, and his disclaimer "I used to be interested in love" (p. 68) is defensive, for his vital concern is clear. The

mirror image is rather clumsily linked to Bech's vision of Vera's eyes, but the reference to his concept of orgasm[1] makes clear the intensity of this moment in their relationship. The contradiction in noticing his image in her eyes and yet not seeing it is perplexing. This obscurity is regrettably inharmonious with the concrete realization of this scene. While Bech thinks of love as something worthy of meditation, Vera's idea is simpler and suggests greater personal involvement. Bech's surprise at her affirmation intimates he has applied her words to their situation. But the expression on her face is hidden and his final impression in the restaurant is of her glowing beauty. This last description of Vera makes her beauty seem so perfect as to be unreachable, and the ring of her finger against the glass adds to the ethereal quality of the scene.

The legation cocktail party abruptly returns Bech to the artificial world he had briefly escaped, and the mirror image is now used to show Bech's awareness of the impossibility of changing his identity or breaking into a new world. As at the story's beginning, there is some satiric reference to the exploitation of artists in the greed with which Bech is surrounded and questioned. Vera's gift contrasts with the selfishness of Bech's admirers, who have "ravaged" (p. 70) his books. It is appropriate that writers should offer themselves through the exchange of books. Their final meeting is perceived as a confrontation, and Vera's message

[1]The description of love and orgasm Bech offers has marked affinities with Updike's own treatment of the subject. See Updike, "Museums and Women," New Yorker, 43, Nov. 18, 1967, pp. 57-61 for extended treatment of this theme.

shows she has reciprocated Bech's response, despite the slight ambiguity of the final word. The concluding tone effectively combines joy and regret to suggest the very nature of an ideal love. Bech's near desperation to reach Vera is symbolic of his desire for such perfect love. The paleness of Vera's coat and volume of poetry again creates an aura of unattainability, as does the fact that she is already dressed to leave. The sorrow of their parting is balanced by the intense joy of breaking through to each other and expressing their bond with utmost sincerity. Bech's seriousness is conveyed in his begging Vera to wait, and it is only with regard to the style of his message that he is drunkenly confident. We can accept his final words as painfully honest, and the preceding depiction of the cocktail party makes such an intense response all the more striking.

In Bech's considering love one of the few things worthy of meditation, there may be a suggestion that it has supplanted religion in his life. Certainly in Couples less ideal loves are surrogates for faith, and the novel implies this is a false substitute which is never fully satisfying. The lyrical tone of "The Bulgarian Poetess" does not carry such an import and Bech's faith in an ideal love, while placed in an ironic perspective, is given some support by Vera's reciprocation of his feeling. Although love in the story is portrayed as altogether enriching and good, there are strong intimations that such a love occurs only momentarily and cannot last in a sustained relationship, at least not with such purity and intensity. Bech's encounter with Vera is necessarily transitory, which may be the only possible con-

dition for an ideal love. In Updike's stories of lovers who marry or live together the pressures of daily life and their own limitations inevitably hurt their love, leaving scars which may be forgiven but never forgotten. "The Bulgarian Poetess" is unusual in its treatment of love, for the ideal is so thoroughly realized, if only fleetingly, that we are convinced of its actuality. But its very perfection implies impossibility and this results in a tone poised between affirmation and regret. In the vibrant encounter between Bech and Vera, set against an atmosphere of sterility, there is a dimension of hope not negated by its transience. The credibility of this hope results largely from careful control of tone in Bech's meetings with Vera. Its beauty is stressed in visually exciting details, such as the colours of blonde and rose associated with Vera, which form a sensuous background to the story. The successful realization of this hope gives the story a remarkable power and makes it one of Updike's most memorable.

Chapter 6 *Rabbit, Run*

Updike once said he thought of his second novel as "*Rabbit, Run*: A Movie."[1] This comparison may have been suggested by the consistent use of present tense in the novel, which gives the events an immediacy and swift pace very like that of film. The present tense is also important in making the reader see things as Rabbit perceives them. Updike's extensive use of interior monologue, shifting from Rabbit's thoughts to those of people he encounters, is an effective means of characterization. Rabbit's thoughts especially are expressed in lively rhythms and revealing idioms. Knowing his ideas creates a bond of sympathy, but because they manifest his values so distinctly, they can also function as self-condemnation.

The opening of the novel immediately stresses Rabbit's main source of pride as well as his regret and bitterness at the passing of his glory. Rabbit's readiness to quit the game when the boys are sick of it shows some sensitivity to other people and consideration for them. His frustration at their hostility and inability to overcome the barrier of age reveal the extent to which Rabbit dwells on his youth as the most fulfilling time in his life. His thoughts about the young "natural"[2] basketball player show Updike's economic use of interior monologue, for we learn both of Rabbit's past fame

[1] Updike, quoted in "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?" by Jane Howard, *Life*, Nov. 4, 1966, p. 81.

[2] John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (New York, 1960), p. 5. Subsequent references indicated by page numbers in the text are to this edition. The Penguin edition of *Rabbit, Run* (Harmondsworth, 1964) contains some revisions, and these will be noted when relevant to my discussion.

and present attitude towards being a forgotton hero through his predictions.

Reliance on interior monologue runs certain risks, however, particularly for a writer as prone to metaphor as Updike. To succeed as a means of characterization the thoughts presented must be consistent with the character emerging from them. Whenever Rabbit begins to sound more metaphoric and literary than is conceivable for such a person, the illusion that we share his exact thoughts is destroyed. There is a delicate balance in perspective between a limited objective view of Rabbit, usually confined to his external appearance, and third person statements of his thoughts in his own distinctive idiom, which often give the impression of a first person account. An example of the breakdown of this impression occurs when Rabbit recalls his quick loss of fame. After saying it feels "cool" (p. 5) to be out of school, it is odd for him to speak of melting, but this is demanded by the simile of becoming "one more piece of the sky of adults" (p. 5), which is difficult to accept as Rabbit's idea.

In the first pages of the novel, certain images are stressed, and these recur throughout the novel, helping to define Rabbit's attitudes to things outside himself. The basketball game is described in feminine terms which are often explicitly sexual. For example, a ball bounces from "the crotch of the rim" (p. 4) and Rabbit's perfect shot drops "whipping the net with a ladylike whisper" (p. 4). On Rabbit's first elated run, he observes the town in considerable detail, and the resulting picture is of ugliness and desolation. The iceplant is mentioned often in the novel, for this is a

landmark for Rabbit on his way home. Its desertion means water no longer flows from it, and this comes to symbolize Rabbit's spiritual aridity. The housing development in which he lives is seen as a blight on the land, with "wan windows" (p. 6) and shingling "varying in color from bruise to dung" (p. 6). In the Penguin edition of Rabbit, Run the idea of disease is further stressed in the revision of the sentence describing the clapboard fronts, for they are not simply weathered but "scabby."[1] Rabbit's vision of his home after the exhilarating run is bleak and depressing, and the vestibule smells effectively add to the overwhelming impression of decay. Throughout the novel keys in doors are described as scratching, and this suggests Rabbit's fumbling, often irritating, attempts to get through to other people.

Rabbit's first encounter with his wife further defines his character. Despite annoyance at the locked door, he attempts reconciliation by kissing her. His hope that Janice will soon "be his girl again" (p. 7) betrays an immature concept of marriage. The term "his girl" suggests he thinks of their relationship as a kind of "going steady" rather than responsible life together. Janice's drinking habits and general slovenliness are contrasted with Rabbit, whose care in hanging his coat shows his love of order.[2] Although Janice's question about Rabbit's becoming a saint is sarcastic, there is a sense in which his quitting smoking shows an intention to purify his life. It would be dangerous, however, to

[1] Updike, Rabbit, Run, Penguin ed. (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 7.

[2] This contrast is made more explicit in the Penguin ed., pp. 8-9, by Rabbit's careful consideration of what he will wear the next day.

assume, as D. Galloway does,[1] that Rabbit is to be understood as a modern saint, whose rejections of responsibility express his religious quest.

Throughout the novel, Updike exposes the banality of Rabbit's cultural environment, as in the description of the Mouseketeer program. We see and hear Mouseketeer Jimmy from Rabbit's perspective, which is not satiric. Lacking the exaggeration of satire, such passages achieve force by our perceiving not only the shallowness of the values propagated by Rabbit's culture, but also Rabbit's acceptance of them. That he should look to Mouseketeer Jimmy for help in his work is a telling comment on his job. Rabbit is sufficiently perceptive, however, to recognize that part of Jimmy's skill lies in a recognition of fraudulence underlying the values he promotes. The superficiality of Rabbit and Janice's religious life is indicated by the awkward silence with which they hear God mentioned. Ostensibly Rabbit only emulates the style of Jimmy's philosophizing, but the prominence given his advice suggests Rabbit's actions can be at least partly interpreted as following Jimmy's platitudes. The glib equation of "Know Thyself" with "be what you are" (p. 9) is potentially dangerous advice for a person like Rabbit who relies on instinct rather than reflection to guide his actions.

Updike's ability to control sympathy for characters despite bias in the prevailing point of view is clearly demonstrated in Rabbit's argument with Janice after the Mouseketeer program. Although Rabbit's view of Janice stresses her unattractiveness, Updike compels sympathy for her by the sharp

[1]Galloway, The Absurd Hero, pp. 28-37.

particularity with which her needs and dependence are expressed. For example, her purchase of a bathing suit not only shows her longing to be slim again, but also the futility of attempting to fill loneliness with things. The reliance on her mother for companionship and judgment underscores her childishness and lack of fulfillment as Rabbit's wife. Her drunken confusion is repugnant, but her fear of Rabbit leaving makes her pitiable. Some limitation in Janice's perception of her husband is suggested in her calling him "Harry" even though he thinks of himself as "Rabbit". She understands and accepts him at a conventional level, failing to grasp that part of him symbolized by his animal nickname. Rabbit also betrays inadequate knowledge of Janice. Like Richard in "Giving Blood", he is angry with Janice for not responding enough to his insult, mistaking resignation for indifference. His rejection of the forgiveness underlying Janice's last request makes Rabbit seem the more guilty partner in the marriage despite the obvious failings of Janice.

Throughout the novel Rabbit's fears are expressed in images of hunting and capture, as when he feels the mess in his apartment as "a tightening net" (p. 14) and "senses he is in a trap" (p. 15) before leaving Janice. Usually such images effectively reinforce the nature of Rabbit's plight, but when they are overtly linked with his animal nickname they can be somewhat ludicrous. Although Rabbit considers his wife and responsibilities a trap from which he must struggle to be free, this is not necessarily the judgment implicit in the novel.

Rabbit's memories of childhood arise naturally on his

way home, and further reveal his character. His mother's dominant role in the family is clear, and it is her "force" (p. 17) which attracts Rabbit, perhaps because he is himself rather weak. His dread of parental discord and shock at the discovery of his father's falsehood suggest greater moral sensitivity than has been apparent in Rabbit's adult behaviour. These recollections help explain Rabbit's depression at the orderliness and apparent familial warmth he sees through his mother's kitchen window. Not only is the home of his own making considerably less happy, but Nelson has taken his place in the affections and concern of his parents.

The imagery of Rabbit's thoughts on his abortive "run" from home helps to define his predicament. In picturing Janice's dinner as cooking "disconsolately" (p. 24) we see Rabbit's guilty awareness of the immediate consequences of his action and unwillingness to think directly of how his desertion will affect Janice. His idyllic vision of the south stresses warmth and freedom, qualities he misses in his life. His alienation from others is effectively conveyed in the perception of his foreignness at the roadside cafe. However, his question, "Is it just these people I'm outside, or is it all America?" (p. 33) is more abstract and philosophical than is consistent with Rabbit's instinctive responses. Images of ensnarement, such as the tree-twigs which "make the same net" (p. 34), increase with Rabbit's confusion of direction. The map itself is seen as a net and like a trapped animal Rabbit claws and tears it. Updike again emphasizes the banality of Rabbit's environment in the account of what he hears on the radio, though the list is longer than necessary to make this

point. Repetition of news about the missing Dalai Lama may indicate Rabbit's lack of spiritual guidance. Rabbit's animal-like nature is conveyed by his reliance on instinct as well as by his nickname, and instinct finally leads him home.

In Rabbit's first encounter with Tothero, his old coach is skillfully characterized through gesture and dialogue. His pathetic need to treat his former champion as still one of "his boys" (p. 45) is expressed in his possessive handling of Rabbit. Tothero tries to adopt the role of a grave, responsible adult reprimanding a child, but the hollowness of his advice is betrayed by clichés like "a long and serious talk about this crisis in your marriage" (p. 43) and "that's a harsh thing to say. Of any human soul" (p. 42). Tothero's utter lack of insight can be seen in his suggestion that Janice's alcoholism could have been controlled by Rabbit's drinking with her.

Rabbit's attitude towards Tothero's suggestion that they eat out with two women is consistent with his character, but demonstrates the trouble Updike sometimes has in presenting events through Rabbit's consciousness. It is credible that Rabbit is able to agree with Tothero only after quelling his guilt by picturing the "dumb slot" (p. 48) of Janice's mouth. More difficult to accept as Rabbit's thoughts are the images with which he considers his new liberty (p. 50). The elaborate metaphor of space could have expressed Rabbit's sense of freedom, but the likening of his shirt collar and tie knot to an expanding star stains credibility. Tothero had been described as stubby and broad-chested, so it is similarly unlikely a person as conscious of physical appearance as

Rabbit would think of his coach as an eddy of air or drifting cloud.

The detailed description of Rabbit's first encounter with Ruth shows skillful use of dialogue and physical observation from Rabbit's perspective to further our understanding of his character and to explain why Ruth attracts him. Rabbit is pleasantly impressed by Ruth's plumpness which contrasts with the "stubborn smallness" (p. 54) of Margaret, who irritates him by her resemblance to Janice. Ruth immediately remarks on Rabbit's nickname, whereas Margaret, like Janice, seems unaware of it. The repeated metaphor likening Ruth's laughter to coins thrown down suggests it is the quality of generosity in Ruth which attracts Rabbit. Rabbit's basketball reminiscences with Tothero not only show his characteristic desire to impress women, but also reveal an important source of Rabbit's sense of alienation. Tothero is the one person in Rabbit's life most likely to appreciate what basketball has meant to him, yet even he has forgotten or confused the highlights of Rabbit's career. Rabbit's inability to communicate the significance of the game at Oriole High further illuminates his estrangement. The description of this game shows it was the satisfaction of doing something superlatively rather than the thrill of competition or triumph which had been important to Rabbit.

The vividness of the restaurant scene derives both from precise physical details and from dialogue which effectively defines each character and shows Updike's ability to capture the idioms of a lower social class than that with which he usually deals. The illusion that we share Rabbit's perception

of the restaurant meeting is only occasionally broken down by extravagant imagery, such as the simile likening the Chinese waiter to a bridesmaid (p. 59) and the comparison of Tothero and Margaret to wooden figures in a barometer (p. 67). The interest of this scene does not result simply from realistic depiction, but from the way Rabbit's observations further illuminate his character. For example, his sensitivity to artificiality is shown by his noticing the paintings of Paris not yet replaced by Chinese decor, the incongruity of the cashier's oriental garb, and the plastic chopsticks.

The account of Rabbit's first love-making with Ruth helps to establish the nature of Rabbit's dilemma and shows admirable balance between compassion for his predicament and critical exposure of his limitations. Once again, Updike's ability to limit our sympathy for Rabbit despite the dominance of his consciousness is skillful. Rabbit's concern to comfort Ruth about her weight is generous, but the juxtaposition of this consolation with his unwillingness to realize the enormity of what he has done to Janice diminishes our impression of his kindness. Although Rabbit thinks of Ruth in coldly commercial terms after paying her, his longing to cherish her as a unique person is made clear in his refusal to accept her role as prostitute. He is alert to any sign that she is responding to him as a person, and makes it plain to her that he is not simply seeking sexual relief. Rabbit's tenderness towards Ruth is admirable, but there is a basic irresponsibility in his treatment of her. This is most obvious in his selfish insistence that their love-making not be hampered by contraceptives, but it is more subtly conveyed

in his disregard for the likely effect of treating Ruth as a wife he loves. He accepts her modesty as praise, for "it shows she is feeling" (p. 81), but does not think of the possible consequences for Ruth of his encouraging her affection. Rabbit's feeling of despair at the height of their love-making is at the basic emptiness of his life, which cannot be filled with another person. His problem is not simply that he is only good at something which is useless in his adult life.

The nature of Rabbit's dilemma is indicated by the prominence given to his vision of the church outside Ruth's window. Although it is difficult to accept as Rabbit's own idea, the statement that the stained-glass church window "seems in the city night a hole punched in reality to show the abstract brilliance burning underneath" (p. 80) hints that Rabbit's "reality" lacks a spiritual dimension. His guilt at shutting out the light from the church may be as superficial as his response to the name of God. But the fact that the church light seems the only kind of comfort when Rabbit is depressed, even if it is a "childness brightness" (p. 86), suggests that Rabbit's predicament is at least in part a religious one. This is made more explicit in Rabbit's quick prayer, which shows he wants the comfort of forgiveness without accepting the consequences of genuine repentance. In Rabbit's confrontation with Ruth's atheism the quality of his faith is further defined. Rabbit is terrified by the implications of disbelief, but sustains his faith by such flimsy "proofs" as well-dressed Sunday churchgoers. His belief is insufficiently important to him to prevent his excitement at

the idea of "making it" (p. 90) with Ruth while the churches are full. Typically, Updike's use of imagery to convey a character's inner life is less effective than the depiction of interaction between characters. Rabbit's turning to Ruth herself as evidence that things do exist for a reason says far more about the nature of his faith than the metaphoric descriptions of the church.

In the rendering of Rabbit's first meeting with Eccles there is disciplined use of Rabbit's perceptions to establish further aspects of his character and to give a fairly complex view of Eccles. Rabbit is at first nonplussed by Eccles' easygoing tolerance, for he expects a scolding. Just as he had underestimated Janice's courage on the night of his desertion, so he misjudges the extent of Eccles' acceptance and is shocked when Eccles makes clear his attitude towards Rabbit's behaviour. Once Rabbit realizes that Eccles considers his desertion a "trampling" on decency (p. 104) he regards the minister as another hunter trying to capture him. Eccles' youth is stressed throughout this scene, not only in his physical appearance but also in his nervous laugh and display of bad temper. His telling Rabbit he is a better man because he quit smoking is rather glib, and Rabbit's perception of the professional aspect of Eccles' concern casts some doubt on Eccles' sincerity. Although Eccles' limitations are indicated in this scene, Updike does not treat him with contempt, but rather explores with considerable sensitivity some of the difficulties inherent in such an occupation. In refusing to adopt a role of righteous, judgmental authority, Eccles may be more true to his own convic-

tions, but he runs the risk of futility in dealing with others. Rabbit's statement of the reasons for his desertion is thoroughly consistent with all we have learned of him. It poses one of the most perplexing dilemmas in the novel. How is a person who has momentarily achieved fulfillment through excellence in one area of life to adjust to inevitable mediocrity in his work and home? The more immediate question arising from this scene with Eccles is whether anyone has the right to impel a person dissatisfied by second-rate living to accept his lot. So far Rabbit's rebellion against mediocrity has taken the somewhat dehumanizing course of following his animal instincts, but this has not really solved his difficulties.

There is ample evidence in the first section of Rabbit, Run to support Eccles' judgment during the golf game that Rabbit is "monstrously selfish" (p. 133). This is brought out forcefully in Rabbit's gleeful recollection of how he has spent his time with Ruth, for he seems to feel their pleasures can continue on Ruth's savings. However, despite the justice of Eccles' criticism, some sympathy is compelled for Rabbit in his conversation with Eccles about the "thing that wasn't there" (p. 132) in his marriage. Eccles' unsympathetic, empirical response to Rabbit's expression of faith reveals his limitations as a minister, and makes Rabbit seem the more authentic believer in a spiritual dimension of life, even if his quest is misguided. After the blundering clumsiness of his golf game, which seems symbolic of his adult life, Rabbit's perfect hit expresses a sense of harmony and rightness he has been unable to communicate. It is not simply the joy of excelling, for Rabbit has said to Eccles, "it's

right up your alley" (p. 132), making clear that "it" has to do with God. Thus the perfect hit can be interpreted as symbolizing for Rabbit a unity with God which brings order and fulfillment to life. There is nothing contrived in this final image of perfection, for it is consistent with the terms of Rabbit's perceptions and arises naturally from his encounter with Eccles. The positive force of this image, occurring at the end of the novel's first large section, places emphasis on the validity of Rabbit's search for a more meaningful life rather than on the pain his quest has brought to others.

The lyrical description of Mrs. Smith's garden continues to place Rabbit in quite a favorable light, showing his sensitive appreciation of the land and delight in his work. However, the scene at the swimming pool radically alters our response. Ruth's questions get to the heart of Rabbit's irresponsible attitude, and her assertion that Rabbit thinks all the world loves him is amusingly confirmed in Rabbit's fantasy about girls admiring his muscles. The most devastating view of Rabbit results when the novel's centre of consciousness shifts from Rabbit to Ruth. In the depiction of her thoughts about men and their treatment of her, Updike shows considerable insight into the emotional life of a woman who has used sex to quell her loneliness and feeling of inferiority. The history of her life from high school petting to prostitution is always credible and there is not a moment in this account when the viewpoint seems that of Updike rather than Ruth. Her opinion of Rabbit is fair, for she acknowledges the tenderness which has made her relationship with him qualitatively

different. But his selfish unconcern for others, and assumption that "other people'll pay your price" (p. 149) is shown as heartlessly cruel by Ruth's anxiety about her possible pregnancy. Her inability to share a fear with Rabbit which is rightly his as well because she knows he will probably run again is justified by his proud statement which interrupts her thoughts. Rabbit's assertion, juxtaposed with Ruth's bitter tears, condemns him more thoroughly than any of Ruth's thoughts, for it shows utter callousness to her immediate mood as well as arrogant disregard of other people in general.

Because Mrs. Springer and Rabbit's parents are first presented from Eccles' point of view, we gain more objective understanding of their responses to Rabbit's desertion than would be possible if we saw them through Rabbit's eyes. This further limits our sympathy for Rabbit, as we see the pain he has brought them, despite their obvious limitations. In both of Eccles' interviews, we see further into Rabbit's difficulties. Mrs. Springer has never accepted her son-in-law and seems to regard it her prerogative to interfere in her daughter's marriage. Mrs. Angstrom offers a generous interpretation of Rabbit's behaviour, but her use of his childish nickname "Hassy" betrays excessive indulgence and her opinion of Janice is so harsh that her view is clearly biased. Her argument with her husband and both of their reminiscences of Rabbit as a boy reveal some of the tensions which have made Rabbit unstable.

In seeing these interviews from Eccles' perspective, we not only acquire greater understanding of his character, but also glimpse more of the difficulties faced by a minister in

contemporary society. Updike's interest in religious questions has already been noted, and in the character of Eccles he exposes some of the tensions caused by lack of faith. Eccles' awareness of his own religious doubt and acknowledgement of the real father he is trying to please make clear his weakness as a guide for Rabbit's quest but also show he is to be regarded with compassion rather than contempt, for at least he is honest with himself, and he does expend himself in attempts to help people in trouble. Eccles' defense of Rabbit to Mrs. Springer shows his own uncertainty, but compels some respect because he at least recognizes the ambiguity of the situation and is aware that reconciliation between Rabbit and Janice cannot be externally imposed. His role as minister would be easier if he were to adopt an authoritarian attitude, but he lacks the strong convictions necessary to fulfill such a function. His spiritual aridity is rather too obviously symbolized throughout these interviews by his extreme thirst, and the overt comment in his family name is similarly obtrusive.

It is difficult to accept the view of some critics[1] that the Lutheran minister Kruppenbach offers the correct spiritual viewpoint, which Eccles is unable to achieve. Throughout Eccles' interview with him, his hardness is stressed, and he is explicitly likened to a brick. His harsh attack on Eccles shows arrogance and insensitivity, although his insistence on the spiritual dimension of their work is an emphasis Eccles realizes he needs. More telling than Kruppenbach's denounce-

[1] See C.T. Samuels, John Updike (Minneapolis, 1969), pp. 40-41, and Dean Doner, "Rabbit Angstrom's Unseen World," New World Writing, XX (1962), pp. 64, 72.

ment is the comment about Eccles when he delays returning home that "he feels at home in public places" (p. 172). His neglect of his own family has been apparent from Lucy's bitterness and casts doubt on his right and ability to counsel other families.

When the novel's point of view shifts back to Rabbit, in the seedy Club Castanet, we have been sufficiently distanced from him that his behaviour now compels little sympathy and we see more results of his selfishness. His concern is solely for his own safety from family entanglements, and he is blind to the import of Ruth's symptoms of pregnancy. When Rabbit decides to join the vulgarity of the group, his idea that "they can all go to Hell" (p. 180) is more than a careless idiom, for he has already thought of Ruth and Harrison as "specters glimpsed from the heart of damnation" (p. 178). The extravagance of this metaphor is lessened in the Penguin edition, for here the two "seem to smile from the heart of damnation."[1] Rabbit's sorrow at Ruth's silent warning against his crude talk is a convincing expression of his guilt, for he realizes that Ruth cares for him despite his loss of self-respect. The cruelty of his treating Ruth like a whore again is emphasized by seeing his demand for oral intercourse from her view. A similar effect results when Rabbit goes to Janice in the hospital and we share Ruth's intense grief at this desertion.

The account of Rabbit's reconciliation with Janice manifests several of Updike's recurring strengths and weaknesses. Rabbit's guilty fears about his wife and unborn

[1] Updike, Rabbit, Run, Penguin ed. (1964), p. 144.

child are conveyed with great immediacy and power. His momentary solace in the memory of a high school girl friend is perfectly in character, as are his sexual fantasies about Lucy and the nurse who leads him to his daughter. It should be noted that Rabbit's sexual daydreams continue after his repentance and reunion with Janice, but he does not give a thought to Ruth. Rabbit's inability to pray directly to God for Janice's safety, and his refusal to give thanks for the safe delivery suggest Rabbit has accepted the idea that there is no God, although these responses may just result from guilt. Rabbit's disappointed expectations of blame on arriving at the hospital and relief at Mrs. Springer's anger not only express Rabbit's guilt but also expose the way tolerance can also be indifference. Janice's easy acceptance of Rabbit comes as a surprise, but this scene is made credible by her hurried, random comments which betray unnatural euphoria. Rabbit's first tears of grief over his actions occur when Janice, in telling of Nelson's daily query, gives him a glimpse of the pain he has caused. Rabbit responds to concrete images, and has so far not permitted himself to picture the effects of his desertion, but this brief vision affects him as no amount of abstract reflection could. Rabbit's second meeting with Janice in the hospital shows Updike's skill in depicting the subtle ways couples can estrange one another. Despite his determination to be tender with Janice, Rabbit quickly becomes defensive and then harsh when she complains about his desertion. Their achievement of peace while watching television is an appropriate and telling comment on their marriage. It is only when they stop trying to communicate

with each other and conform to the blandness provided by television that they can reach a form of unity.

Although Rabbit's return to Janice is convincing because of the consistency of each character's behaviour, this section is marred by metaphoric writing which blurs the clarity of Updike's insights. The reunion shows Rabbit's repentance for the pain he has brought, but there is no indication that he feels similarly reconciled to God, and his inability or unwillingness to pray suggests he has not yet found religious peace. The description of Eccles' offer of a cigarette as a "wafer of repentance" (p. 196) is thus misleading because of its theological implication. Rabbit has been described as "not a water animal" (p. 143), so it is odd for him to think in terms of water imagery as often as he does. These images sometimes express a terror of the unknown, but they are used inconsistently, as when Rabbit is relieved at Janice's forgiveness and feels he is "floating on his back on a great sea of cleanness" (p. 203). His sensation of drowning at the idea that there is no God (p. 198) is made confusing by the idea that he is held underwater by his own semen. It seems likely that this complicated metaphor is supposed to foreshadow the baby's drowning, but at this point, it is an awkward intrusion. Rabbit begins to think of himself as "Harry" for the first time after telling Eccles "I won't run off" (p. 199), presumably to show that he is no longer behaving like a rabbit. However, because Rabbit has never associated his nickname with running from his wife, the change seems unwarranted. Several of the images used to convey Rabbit's reactions in this section are so disconnected

from the context that they distract attention from his state of mind, as when he falls asleep hearing "the claws of the bear rattle like rain outside" (p. 206), and awakens to "sunshine, the old clown" (p. 206). The allusion to Pentecost in Rabbit's elation after seeing his baby (p. 218) again hints of a religious experience, but this is not justified by his thoughts or actions.

A coherent interpretation of the novel must account for the apparent vacillation in Rabbit's religious outlook. Although Mrs. Smith has told him he has the gift of life, Rabbit feels the irrevocable loss of something vital in the quiet days before Janice returns from the hospital. The "fullness" (p. 225) Rabbit realizes he has lost might be interpreted as faith, but his thoughts on going to church after Janice's return makes this unlikely. Rather, this "thing that had left his life" (p. 225) is associated with his childhood, and is more likely his belief in the possibility of satisfaction through achievement. Rabbit's religious position is most explicitly defined when he attends church. As with so many of his beliefs, his "feeling that there is an unseen world is instinctive" (p. 234), but the quality of his faith is indicated by the use of the word "transactions" to describe his relationship with this world. An excellent example of just such a transaction occurs when Rabbit considers his new job. He is honest enough to recognize its fraudulence and feels a need for forgiveness, but his resolution to pray for this forgiveness never includes questioning whether he should continue with such dishonest work. The tenuousness of Rabbit's faith is perfectly defined as he

enters the church. His belief in immortality is bolstered by the sight of girls dressed for church, and this so elates him that he does not ask for forgiveness. Even his prayer of thanksgiving consists of disconnected words which "bob inconsecutively among senseless eddies of gladness" (p. 235). Rabbit spends most of the time in church in a characteristic fantasy about Lucy. He believes in an unseen world because he wants the comfort offered by faith in immortality, but he rejects the discipline and sacrifice demanded by authentic Christian faith. This is made explicit in Rabbit's thoughts about Eccles' sermon, and the entire novel demonstrates the instability caused by his "turn toward the light however it glances into his retina" (p. 237). Light imagery is effectively worked into the description of Rabbit's walk with Lucy, and this scene illustrates the confusion resulting from his lack of direction. Although Lucy is to some extent responsible for Rabbit's miscalculation, it is his reliance on instinct which leads to the blunder. Much more serious consequences of Rabbit's lack of "mindful will" (p. 237) are eloquently portrayed in the rest of the novel.

The description of the Sunday when Rabbit again deserts Janice is the most tautly written section of the novel. Everything Rabbit notices on his return from church adds to the tense, oppressive atmosphere, and his inability to transcend his selfish desires leads to predictible disruption of the peace he had experienced with Janice. More cruel than his sexual abuse of her is his insistence that she drink so she will be more responsive to him. She had apparently stopped drinking completely in order to please him, and knowing

her tendency towards alcoholism it is particularly irresponsible of Rabbit to insist on her drinking. Rabbit's "love" for Janice is in this instance clearly lust, for on leaving he thinks he has "stopped loving her at last" (p. 249). His refusal to sympathize with Janice's situation, and angry assertion that "the thing is how I feel" (p. 248) summarizes Rabbit's attitude towards people in general. The switch to Janice's viewpoint after Rabbit leaves masterfully conveys her pathetic inability to cope with adult problems, and, as her drunken confusion increases, the scene becomes vividly nightmarish. By gaining first-hand knowledge of Janice's insecurity our sympathy for her increases, making Rabbit's behaviour seem reprehensible. At the same time, it is clear from her cliché-ridden notions of "sharing" (p. 253) that she lacks the strength and maturity to develop a satisfactory marriage with Rabbit. There have been hints of the baby's impending death in Rabbit's vision of Rebecca's crib as "coffin-like" and his idea that "night itself had swept in and washed her away like a broken piece of rubbish" (p. 245). Janice's sense of a stranger's presence adds to the ominous atmosphere, and her distorted sense of time and space, combined with her panic about her mother's visit, make the drowning seem inevitable. The silence she feels in response to her frantic prayers coincides with her increased consciousness of a third person present, suggesting awareness of God. The final sentence of this section is admirably controlled, for it adequately expresses the enormity of the situation in terms consistent with Janice's consciousness.

The concluding section of the novel fairly and convinc-

ingly depicts each character's response to the child's death, and offers further insight into the quality and effects of Rabbit's beliefs. Although there are some metaphoric passages which detract from the clarity of this section, such as the description of Rabbit's withdrawal from others at the funeral (p. 290), on the whole the writing is quite disciplined and effective. After the initial glimpse of the Eccles' reaction to the death, Rabbit is consistently the centre of consciousness, although there once again are moments when it is difficult to accept that the ideas are his, as when the ruins of a settler's home in the woods inspire cosmic reflections (pp. 296-297). It is crucial for an understanding of Rabbit's response to Rebecca's death that we gain such close knowledge of his thoughts. There is no doubt that Rabbit recognizes and accepts his guilt in the accident, and he makes this clear to Janice. He has difficulty accepting forgiveness, however, because he realizes that this will entail further responsibilities to those he has hurt. This is made explicit in his relief at Mrs. Springer's intolerance when he is harsh with Janice (p. 285). Rabbit is still struggling to maintain faith in God, for he rejects Tothero's "revelation", but when he tries to pray, "there's no connection" (p. 276). At the funeral service, on hearing promises of everlasting life, Rabbit "feels their possibility" (p. 291) and assumes that no one else has genuine faith because each is so sad. Rabbit's renewed faith at the graveside is authentic, but his characteristic disregard for any feelings but his own results in his devastating denials of guilt to Janice. Because he feels forgiven himself, he tries to force Janice

to accept "the simplest factual truth" (p. 293) without taking her weakness into account. He is now like a trap from which Janice recoils. Rabbit's tendency to say thoughtless, cruel things to people he loves has already been apparent, so this final outburst is plausible. It is not so much hatred for Janice as the discovery that even his mother is horrified by him which spurs him to dash from the cemetery. Rabbit has always relied most on his mother's acceptance, so her rejection is more than he can cope with.

Some sympathy for Rabbit has been maintained throughout the novel, despite the inevitably harsh views afforded by seeing Rabbit from the perspective of other characters. His predicament is not entirely of his own making and there is something admirable in his struggle against mediocrity. His need for religious faith is genuine, and although he is unwilling to accept the discipline demanded by belief, he cannot find adequate guidance in his religious quest. Eccles can tell him how to live properly with his wife and child, but is unable to help Rabbit understand "the thing behind everything" (p. 280). During Rabbit's run from the cemetery, sympathy for him wanes. His jaunty feeling that "Janice and Eccles and his mother and his sins seem a thousand miles behind" (p. 297) is utterly irresponsible, as is his assumption that "you do things and do things and nobody really knows" (p. 298). The most adverse judgment of Rabbit occurs in his final confrontation with Ruth. Her blistering condemnation of Rabbit seems justified, particularly in her stress on his unconcern for the needs of others. This selfish indifference is perfectly exemplified in Rabbit's reaction to

Ruth's sharp presentation of the alternatives open to him. He barely listens, for he is visualizing a sandwich and love-making, and instead of facing the choices Ruth sets before him, he merely hopes for a "soldierly effect" (p. 304) and escapes.

Rabbit's ultimate negation is not only a rejection of his responsibilities to other people, but a denial of any goodness or reality outside himself. The darkened church window effectively suggests Rabbit's loss of religious hope. His vision of the vast cinder field is frightening in its nihilism and Rabbit gains a false sense of direction and purpose by detailed observation of his surroundings. Rabbit's relief at leaving the complicated responsibilities of his life is expressed in the novel's final words, and it should be emphasized that these are Rabbit's thoughts, not an approving comment from Updike, as some critics have suggested.[1] Similarly the novel's title is descriptive rather than imperative. Rabbit has felt such relief before, but it is always transitory, because ultimately he cannot escape the burden of himself.

Rabbit, Run is a powerful depiction of the consequences of a solipsistic way of life. Updike has created in Rabbit a character whose situation compels attention and sympathy because of the questions it poses about how to cope with unfulfilling work and home life. Rabbit's sensitivity to his surroundings is exceptional, but his predicament is almost

[1] See Graham H. Duncan, "The Thing Itself in Rabbit, Run," English Record, 13 (April 1963), p. 37; Samuels, John Updike, p. 42; and Arthur Mizener, "Behind the Dazzle is a Knowing Eye," New York Times Book Review, March 18, 1962, p. 1.

paradigmatic for his class and time in history. Rabbit's solution is to live by what "feels right" at any given moment. The limitations of this response are forcibly demonstrated throughout the novel. The solution offered by Eccles is also inadequate because it fails to provide Rabbit with a larger meaning for his life. No answer to Rabbit's problem is suggested in the novel, although the character of Caldwell in The Centaur suggests a viable response to this dilemma of mediocrity. The strength of Rabbit, Run does not lie in its solutions but rather in its forthright presentation of a significant problem and its ramifications. The epigraph of the novel suggests the pattern of Rabbit's life, and ultimately it is both the hardness of his heart and external circumstances which cause him to reject the motions of grace in his life. Although the novel is flawed at times by lack of discipline in metaphoric description, the characters are successfully realized, largely through skillful use of interior monologue juxtaposed with realistic dialogue. This means of characterization imposes a valuable curb on Updike's descriptive bent, but it also makes any lapses in control glaringly obvious. The events of the novel never seem contrived, for they develop naturally from the values and decisions of the main characters. These events generate a tension of their own which is released, but not resolved, by the conclusion. Because of Rabbit's own limitations, a definite resolution of his problems would seem artificially imposed, so the ending is tactful rather than evasive. The skill and insight with which Updike delineates Rabbit's predicament are worthy achievements, and make Rabbit, Run his most satisfying novel.

Chapter 7 Conclusions

Several general characteristics of Updike's writing have emerged in this study. Skill in characterization and accuracy in dialogue are consistent virtues of his work. His handling of point of view is subtle, and often crucial in controlling sympathy for characters. His use of the distance between narrator and protagonist to provide ironic comment is competent, but when this distance narrows, his writing risks sentimentality. Many of his stories, including those selected for this study, are carefully structured around the consciousness of a dominant character, so that the events arise naturally from the context of the prevailing point of view. Although Updike avoids using large, catastrophic events to give his stories shape, they are not random selections from a character's stream of consciousness. Because the stories usually focus on a particular problem or experience of a central character, they are patterned to offer as much insight as possible into this problem or experience. Thus the difinite structure of an Updike story usually appears to be a natural development from the story's main events. The interrelationship of structure and meaning is maintained throughout Rabbit, Run as well, for Rabbit's thoughts illuminate the events which have been set in motion by his own predilections and values. This gives the novel consistent force and liveliness which are qualities lacking in Updike's other novels, as discussion of them in the introduction has indicated. Although The Centaur poses questions similar to those raised by Rabbit, Run, the exploration of possible answers to them is cheapened and vitiated by the imposition

of grandiose, mythical patterns on the realistic framework of the novel. In Rabbit, Run, external devices to convince us of the novel's significance are avoided, and the result is a more honest treatment of subject.

No work of Updike's fiction completely avoids his most characteristic fault of inept metaphoric writing. Updike is quite a painterly writer, and many of his images and descriptions are fresh and insightful. However, lapses in control are most obvious in metaphoric passages which bear little relationship to the immediate or larger context of a work. Although at times such writing has no discernible purpose, it it often an overt attempt to add depth and substance. In many cases the "significance" imposed is clearly theological. Instead of providing conclusive evidence of important meaning, such metaphoric excesses are at best distracting, and, at their worst, can cast doubt on the seriousness and integrity of a work. It is unfortunate that Updike does not exercise greater discipline in his penchant for elaborate imagery, for this frequently impedes coherent interpretation of his work as well as detracts from its serious purpose.

This study has attempted to clarify the danger inherent in treating Updike's style as a separate entity of his work. Likewise, it should indicate the difficulty of pursuing themes without reference to the ways they are embodied in particular works. Of the various critical approaches outlined in the introduction to this essay, the one which argues that Updike's style mars the clarity of his ideas most successfully avoids a dichotomy between language and ideas. Whereas the validity of any critical judgment can be demonstrated only by discussion

of specific works, the major critical attitudes towards Updike often lack adequate supporting evidence. Thus, while agreeing generally with the criticism that Updike's style often confuses his ideas, I also believe there are some stylistic qualities, such as his use of point of view, which are frequently crucial to the lucidity of his presentation. Such points can only be argued by reference to particular works. Although a fair critical approach must take into account as many aspects of a writer's work as possible, any study is inevitably biased. Mine has attempted to particularize discussion of Updike by close examination of several works, which I feel is a necessary foundation for valid critical assessment.

The significance of many of Updike's observations has been noted throughout this study, but the question of his larger significance as a writer concerned with the human predicament remains open. That he is interested in more than accurate observation of human behaviour is clear from the implications of the problems he treats, as this study has shown. "Pigeon Feathers" deals with the problem of maintaining religious faith without external evidence to justify it. By treating this problem from a child's viewpoint, Updike also comments on the effect of adult evasions of such questions. "The Christian Roommates" also examines loss of religious faith, and explores the possible effects of a person with firm convictions on someone of lesser faith. "Giving Blood" is concerned with the effect of selfish behaviour on a marriage, and the difficulty of maintaining a generous, forgiving attitude in such a sustained relationship. The possibility of

a love free from self-interest is examined in "The Bulgarian Poetess" and the story suggests such love can only be realized in fleeting encounters.

Rabbit, Run presents the dilemma of a person incapable of adjusting to mediocrity in his work and personal relationships, but lacking the strength and ability to improve his situation. This novel also criticizes the values of a culture in general in its examination of the factors leading to Rabbit's unsatisfying life. The sense of accomplishment he had achieved in playing excellent basketball cannot be realized in his adult life, for in his society successful salesmanship involves some fraudulence. Janice's values have been largely formed by the materialism of her parents' class and the trivia she watches on television, making her incapable of coping maturely with married life. The novel's presentation of Rabbit's predicament is complex, for it does not ascribe his problems to any single source, but rather demonstrates the interrelationship of his environment and inner life. This makes it difficult for him to transcend the limitations he perceives in people around him, for he is not free from them himself. Rabbit's desire for a spiritual dimension to his life reflects Updike's concern with the need for religious faith and the difficulty of achieving it in modern life. The weakness of Eccles' tenuous belief is made clear, but the novel offers no viable alternative.

I have argued that Updike is concerned with significant questions, but the manifestations of this concern must be carefully examined. This study has attempted to interpret and evaluate selected works so as to make a general assessment of

Updike's importance. Although only one novel has been discussed in detail, weaknesses in his other novels, which have been touched on in the introduction, lead me to the conclusion that Updike is more successful as a short story writer than novelist. Rabbit, Run is the only Updike novel which sustains a convincing and consistent depiction of human beings engaged with problems which have a significance extending beyond the novel itself. Updike's short stories, perhaps because of their inevitably limited scope, are usually fairly concise and perceptive in their treatment of particular problems. The economy demanded by the short story form imposes a discipline which curbs Updike's tendency towards mere documentation and excessive imagery.

Updike's skill in characterization is more suited to the short story because his strength lies in capturing the essence of a character through his speech and gesture rather than in lengthy development. Rabbit is in many ways Updike's most memorable character, but he changes little in the course of the novel, and his actions are an extension of a relatively fixed personality. It is conceivable that Rabbit could be as forcefully realized in a short story. It is the exploration of the effect of his life on others, and of his attitudes towards his dilemma, which sustains the interest of the novel. The ambivalence noticed in the characterization of Piet illustrates the difficulty Updike has in giving extensive treatment to one character. The span of events in Couples suggests the possibility of significant changes in the main character, but Piet does not seem to respond adequately to the events of his life, and at the novel's end he

appears to have developed little. George Caldwell is a carefully realized and distinctive character, but again in The Centaur Updike seems to have trouble pursuing the potential possibilities of a character through the length of a novel, and resorts to a mythic superstructure to suggest the meaning of Caldwell's life. The Poorhouse Fair and Of the Farm lack any dynamic, fully realized characters whatsoever.

Updike's concern with significant problems also seems more suited to the short story form. His distinction is not in originality or profoundity of thought, and his work as a whole does not challenge prevailing ideas and assumptions. His criticisms of contemporary American society are fairly shallow,[1] although Rabbit, Run does make some sharp comment on the mediocrity and banality of middle-class life. The problems with which Updike is concerned are hardly new or unique to his fiction, and when his works do imply answers to these problems, they are quite predictible for a writer of avowed Christian persuasion. However, Updike does offer many subtle, arresting glimpses into particular aspects of the problems he confronts, and these are most forceful when given the sharp focus possible in a short story. Updike's perceptions usually lack the strength and complexity to sustain the wider range of vision demanded by the novel.

Updike's importance, then, derives from his ability to capture and define the peculiar quality of predicaments common to many modern people. Often the problem presented is quite narrowly circumscribed to a particular relationship or expe-

[1]See pp. 9 and 13-14 of my introduction for fuller discussion of this point.

rience, and this makes it eminently suitable for treatment in a short story. Updike is concerned with the question of how modern man is to cope with the loss of traditional beliefs and values, but as a writer he is most capable of dealing with this question as it is manifested in the ordinary events of daily life which may appear so slight as not to warrant the attention he gives them. However, in many of his stories he does offer distinctive, perceptive insights into the nature of these problems and different possible responses to them. In many cases the issues he writes about are sufficiently complex in themselves to provide the substance for lengthy treatment, but, with the exception of Rabbit, Run, Updike's novels reveal the difficulty he has in sustaining critical examination of problems. In each novel except Rabbit, Run he tends to impose meaning through external devices which merely betray lack of genuine significance. But within the tighter confines of the short story, Updike frequently offers perceptive analysis of certain aspects of modern life, and this in itself is a worthy accomplishment. While this achievement may be inadequate to give his work lasting value, it is sufficient to commend critical attention now, and this has been the impetus for this essay.

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